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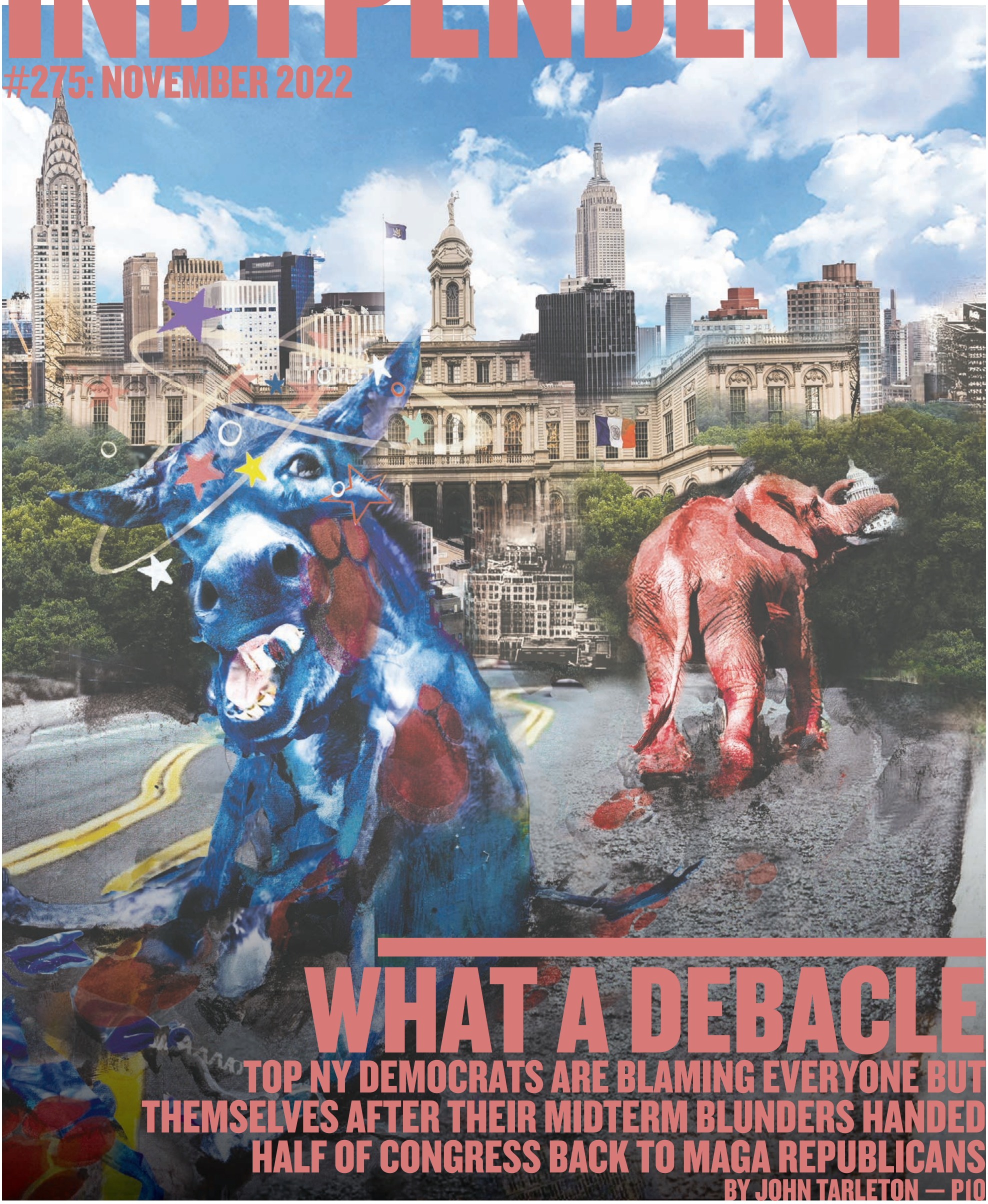
KINGSTON, NY CUTS RENTS 15% — P13 • BARBARA KINGSOLVER — P14



WHAT A DEBACLE

TOP NY DEMOCRATS ARE BLAMING EVERYONE BUT THEMSELVES AFTER THEIR MIDTERM BLUNDERS HANDED HALF OF CONGRESS BACK TO MAGA REPUBLICANS

BY JOHN TARLETON — P10

DAVID HOLLENBACH

THE INDYPENDENT

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NOV/DEC

OPENS NOV 18 • $14–$17
FILM: BAD AXE
Asian American filmmaker David Siev returns to his hometown of Bad Axe, Michigan at the beginning of the pandemic to help keep his family's restaurant afloat. When the George Floyd uprising begins, Siev's family uses its collective voice to speak out in their conservative community. What unfolds is a real-time portrait of 2020 through the lens of one multi-cultural family. 102 min. Accessibility: Assistive Listening, T-Coil. Visit ifccenter.com/ or call 212-924-7771 for showtimes.
IFC CENTER
323 6th Ave., Manhattan

NOV 23 • $25 • 10PM–4AM
HOUSE MUSIC FROM DETROIT: MARCELLUS PITTMAN
As a child growing up in Detroit, Marcellus "Malik" Pittman was playing his radio at maximum volume, listening to the sounds of "the Wizzard" and the "Electrifying Mojo", in addition to the jazz outputs of Rosetta Hines. He is a true master of the knobs. And you might be lucky enough to see him spin some vinyl. 100% worth going out on Thanksgiving's eve (dancing is good for the soul, anyway). Get tickets ahead of time via ra.co/events/1601979.
NOWADAYS
56-06 Cooper Ave, Queens

NOV 25 • $20 SUGGESTED • 8PM–9:30PM
MUSIC: SHOKO NAGAI'S TOKALA
Shoko Nagai's TOKALA explores the sound of the ancient connection between Far East Asia and the Middle East via the Silk Road where cultural exchange happened and left an imprint which became an integral part of Japanese culture. Shoko Nagai on accordion and piano with Sita Chay on violin and voice.
BARBÈS
376 9th St., Brooklyn

DEC 3 • 4:30PM • FREE
SCIENCE AGAINST CAPITALISM: GEOCHEMISTRY AND SOLAR COMMUNISM
As a part of Film Forum's series *Science Against Capitalism: The Role of Biophysical Sciences in Building A Sustainable Future for All*, David Schwartzman, biogeochemist and professor emeritus, will give a talk on geochemistry, earth history and the building of solar communism. This event will take place in-person and will be live-streamed. More info via bit.ly/3hxlN3u
THE PEOPLE'S FORUM
320 W 37th St., Manhattan

DEC 8 • $15/$7 REDUCED PRICE • 7:30PM–9PM
FILM: I DIDN'T SEE YOU THERE
When a circus tent goes up outside of his apartment, a disabled filmmaker must confront the legacy of the Freak Show and whether his past autobiographical filmmaking has fit into its tradition. With the camera pointed away from himself, he captures the personal and poetic from his wheelchair. 75 min. This screening includes open captioning, as well as ASL interpretation during the talk-back discussion. There will be a post-screening Q&A with filmmaker Reid Davenport.
MAYSLES DOCUMENTARY CENTER
343 Lenox Avenue/Malcolm X Boulevard, Manhattan

DEC 9 & DEC 10 • FREE TO ATTEND • FRI 5PM–9PM & SAT 11AM–7PM
SOCIAL JUSTICE HOLIDAY MARKET
Mayday Space's annual Social Justice Holiday Market is back in its fifth year. A delightful indoor gathering of small vendors selling all things social justice-y, so you don't have to buy corporate crap for your loved-ones. The market offers a platform that highlights the work of local, POC, queer, senior, low-income, femme, immigrant and solidarity economy small businesses and creatives. Expect a festive, community-oriented environment with music, DJs, food, and kids' activities. Masks are required at all times, when not eating or drinking.
MAYDAY SPACE
176 St Nicholas Ave, Brooklyn

THRU JAN 8 • TUE–SUN 10AM–3:30PM
PAY-WHAT-YOU-WISH AT BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN
Some areas of the Garden are inaccessible while the holiday light show is installed. Accordingly, daytime admission is pay-what-you-wish. Take advantage! There's nothing like going into the conservatories on a cold day and breathing in the humid warm air in the rainforest room or avoiding prickly cacti in the desert room. Please note the conservatories close 30 minutes before the rest of the garden.
BROOKLYN BOTANIC GARDEN
Entrances @150 Eastern Parkway, 455 Flatbush Ave. & 990 Washington Ave.

THRU FEB 19 • FREE • TUE–SUN 10:30AM–5PM & FRI 10:30AM–7PM
HISTORY EXHIBIT: ENHEDUANNA AND THE WOMEN OF MESOPOTAMIA
Journey back to ancient Mesopotamia during the 3rd millennium BCE and explore women's roles in religious contexts as goddesses, priestesses and worshippers as well as in social, economic and political spheres as mothers, workers and rulers. One particularly remarkable woman who wielded considerable religious and political power was the high priestess and poet Enheduanna (ca. 2300 B.C.), the earliest-named author in world literature.
THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
225 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

THRU MARCH 5 • $18–25 • MON, WED, THU, SAT, SUN 10AM–6PM / FRI 10AM–10PM*
ART EXHIBIT: EDWARD HOPPER'S NEW YORK
Edward Hopper was known for his human scale and largely unpopulated depictions of New York. This new exhibit takes a comprehensive look at Hopper's life and work, from his early impressions of New York in sketches, prints, and illustrations, to his late paintings, in which the city served as a backdrop for his evocative distillations of urban experience.
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THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
99 Gansevoort Street, Manhattan

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WOLLMAN RINK, CENTRAL PARK
830 5th Ave, Manhattan

WEDNESDAYS • FREE • 8:30PM
KARAOKE AT STARR BAR
Starr Bar is a nightlife venue in Bushwick that celebrates and supports movements for social justice. Ten percent of its profits go to supporting the Mayday Space community center. If you're going to indulge in Karaoke, might as well do it for a good cause. Sing your heart out.
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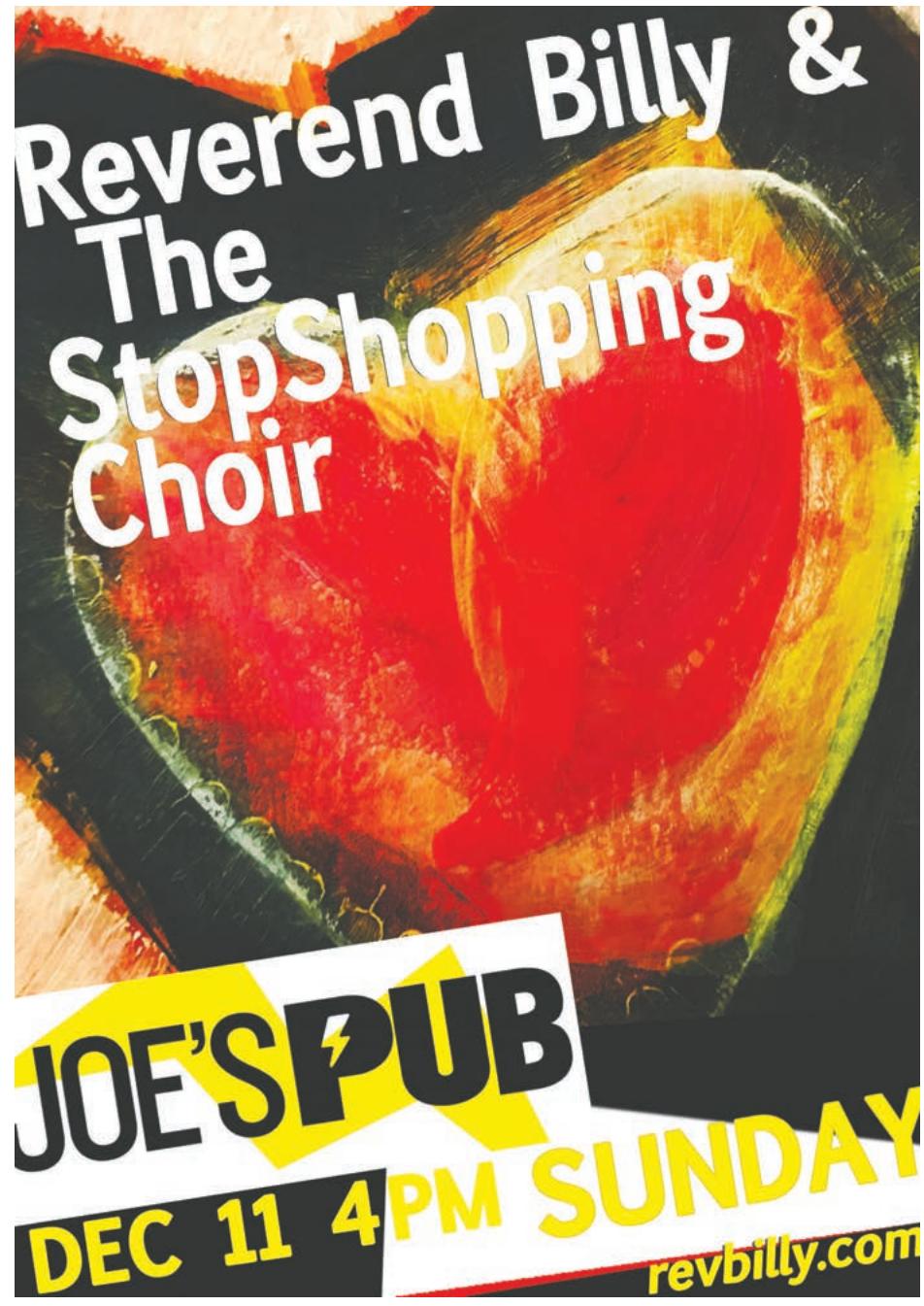

AMBA GUERGUERIAN

AMBA GUERGUERIAN

‘OUR LIBERATION IS TIED TO OTHERS’

SUNSET PARK-BASED GROUP LAUNCHES UNPERMITTED OUTDOOR MARKET, POLITICAL EDUCATION CLASSES

By Amba Guerguerian

On Sundays from May to October a corner of Sunset Park feels like a thriving Mexico City marketplace. It’s called Plaza Tonatiuh and is organized by Mexicanos Unidos. At this year’s final Plaza on October 30, the narrow pathways between rows of vendors in the park were crowded with attendees of all ages. Vendors sold Mexican and other Latin American food, household items, toys, clothes, jewelry and more. Live music and dancing in celebration of the Nov. 2 Day of the Dead lasted into the night.

Mexicanos Unidos formed in the initial weeks of the George Floyd uprising that roiled New York City three summers ago. In July 2020, the organization held protests around the killing of Vanessa Guillen, a 20-year-old U.S. soldier who was bludgeoned to death by another soldier, Aaron David Robinson.

Later that month, they distributed a flyer: “United Mexicans of America *Lost invita a un foro para discutir nuestros proyectos comunitarios*/Invites you to a forum to discuss our future community projects.”

By early 2021, MxU was protesting less often and had begun to shift its energy toward community engagement. In May 2021, galvanizing frustration around gentrification and crackdowns on street vendors, they launched Plaza Tonatiuh, their central organizing project.

At the last Plaza of 2021, there were 20 vendors. This year ended with 88 and more looking to join.

During every Plaza, MxU holds a vendor assembly to discuss operations. On Nov. 7, a week after the last Plaza of the season, the organization invited vendors back to Sunset Park to participate in a debrief. Around 60 people showed up. Childcare and coffee were provided.

Vendors and MxU members formed two conversation circles in which one by one, each participant shared critique of themselves and the Plaza as a whole. They discussed at length how to secure access to bathrooms when the Parks Department closes them hours before the Plaza ends and other logistical issues.

Now in the off season, MxU will be synthesizing vendors’ feedback and needs and traveling to vendors’ homes to continue political education. The organization, with around 50 members representing all boroughs, hopes to soon procure a community space in Sunset Park.

Leo, 26, is the chair. He grew up in Sunset Park with his mother and four siblings but has since been priced out and now lives in Bensonhurst. Leo was radicalized by learning about the 43 disappeared students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College in Guerrero, Mexico in 2014. In 2021, he traveled to Mexico to join indigenous activists occupying Bonafont water-bottling plants.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

BUILDING COMMUNITY: *Leo is the chair of Mexicanos Unidos.*

PUBLIC SPACE: *Mexicanos Unidos runs an open-air market at Sunset Park on Sundays from May to October.*

How was Mexicanos Unidos formed?

It was formed during the George Floyd uprising and had a lot to do with what happened around that time with Vanessa Guillen and the consciousness that grew out of that. We wanted to direct those mainly nationalistic tendencies toward something more revolutionary, more organized for the collective — also understanding that in New York City it’s not just the Mexican diaspora. So so we have a large Caribbean, Asian, Central American and South American diaspora. We wanted to make folks understand that our liberation is tied to the liberation of others.

Tell us a little bit about the political education you have coming up and why it’s important.

Right now, we’re gearing up to start doing more political education classes. We see these as a necessity. We’re doing that with the plaza participants first. It is a way for us to also get unity in thought, because we already have unity in action. It’s also something that we’ve also been doing internally with incoming members.

Our basic course consists of the *Five Golden Rays* by Mao, *The State and Revolution* by Lenin, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Friere, *Wretched of the Earth* by Franz Fanon and we also include excerpts from *Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo Galeano. We have advanced courses too that consist of readings on George Jackson, and more by the Black Panthers.

What was your experience with how people received what you were sharing?

We use Paolo Friere and popular education because we strive for people to understand that we’re not teachers — we’re also learning with you. After going through the study, we see a change of mentality and commitment, but some folks retain it a lot faster than others. It’s hard to ask folks to study it on their own time, while they’re also working-class people. Not everybody has time to read. And not everybody can read. So we’ve shifted a lot of our learning to be done mainly through discussions.

We met at the end of 2021 during protests outside of Bergen County Jail in North Jersey. The cops were beating up ralliers for supporting hunger-striking ICE detainees on the inside. That was brutal.

We realized how unsustainable that was and how burnout was so prevalent, especially around organizers.

I remember watching a video of Kwame Ture where he mentioned the difference between mobilizations and organization. In 2020 and in parts of 2021, we were still just heavy on the mobilizing. Nobody ever pulled out a clipboard while we were marching to ask people what they can contribute or ask people where they’re at, or how can we organize to defeat this monster that has his body all across North America.

So we took a moment to sit back and start to base build in Sunset Park and do the Plaza, to stay somewhere consistently. And just build here, honestly.

Continued on page 15

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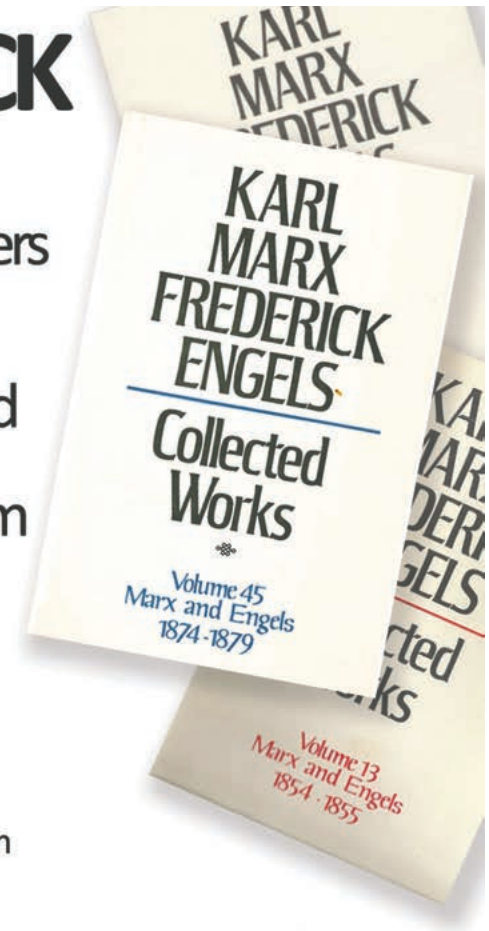

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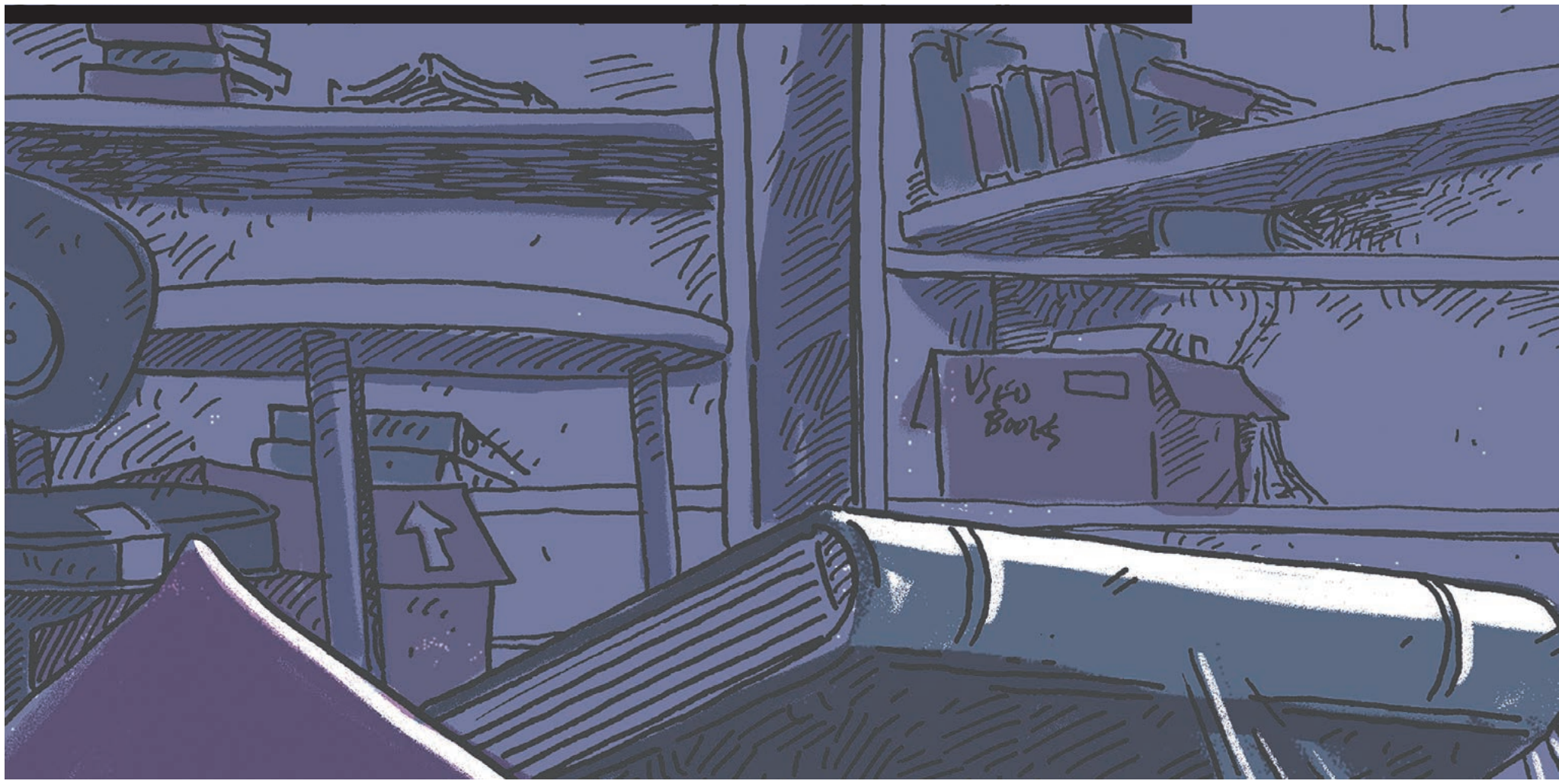

DON'T TURN THE PAGE ON SCHOOL LIBRARIES

STUDENTS STILL WANT ALL THE MAGIC YOU CAN FIND IN A LIBRARY, YET 60% OF NYC SCHOOLS DON'T HAVE ONE THAT'S FUNCTIONING

By Ben Mankoff

"My mom won't take me to the public library," said a high-school sophomore in Brooklyn upon learning that her school library didn't have the novel she'd been craving. When she was offered an e-book version, her nose crinkled. She preferred to wait until she could get the paper book at school, even though it might take months to arrive.

This student needed her school library. It was barely up to the task. Dust lay thick on the shelves, new books hadn't been ordered in years, and instead of a certified school librarian, the person running the place was a newly minted substitute teacher with a master's degree in who-the-hell-cares: me.

The condition of the library — most books a decade past relevance, cataloging software I couldn't use, broken furniture and computers shoved away in a corner — should not have been surprising. New York City's public-school libraries were in crisis long before the pandemic endangered enrollment and budgets, and before the recent national moral panics around gender and race prompted waves of censorship. State regulations require most city public secondary schools to employ a certified school library media specialist, but between 2005 and 2014, the number of librarians employed in city schools fell by half, according to a report by *Education Week*. That decline has continued. The city Department of Education's (DOE) Office of Library Services doesn't have reliable data, but the available figures indicate that over 60% of city high schools do not have the state-mandated library media specialist on staff, and more than 40% don't have any library space.

With some 1.1 million students and a budget approaching $40 billion this school year, why have city school libraries been allowed to slip into neglect? The answer is like the Scylla and Charybdis of Greek myth, with the multiheaded beast of capitalism on one side and a vortex of bureaucracy on the other. Other reasons are the legacy of the Bloomberg administration's policies, which made a fetish of competition between principals, and the accelerating integration of digital technologies into conceptions of literacy.

A CHANGE IN MANAGEMENT

In the early 2000s, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his education chancellor, Joel Klein, set out to change the way the city educates children. Their program involved breaking up large schools, making space for more charter schools, training principals in business management and replacing superintendent oversight with private-sector contracts paid out of school budgets.

"Klein set out to do something any other schools chief would consider insane: Disrupt his own schools with built-in competitors," Richard Whitmire wrote admiringly in a book about the era. Klein and Bloomberg, with money from Bill Gates and others, pushed the progressive-sounding Small Schools of Choice initiative, which broke large "failing" schools into smaller student bodies sharing a single campus. Klein also brought in former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, nicknamed "Neutron Jack" for his love of neutron-bomb mass layoffs, to head the board of a then-new city program, the now national Leadership Academy, whose goal remains training new principals in the art of "disrupting inequities."

Their philosophy was that competition breeds innovation, that empowered principals would innovate in response to the needs of their communities. That school-district-as-market philosophy often resulted in educators within a school campus jockeying for the limited space available. That left libraries especially vulnerable to neglect, because their mandate is unfunded and therefore unenforced.

One principal, a former librarian, told me that her campus had no librarian because she and the two other principals who share the space could not agree on its use. "My kids wanted to do a mural in there," she said, but the other principals objected. "It was this competitive thing, again, a campus. No real shared vision." When the last librarian left for another school, hiring a new one had fallen to the bottom of the priority list, leaving the 500-odd students on this campus without one. Nationally, 90% of schools that lose a librarian don't hire a new one.

"The DOE has shifted to this franchise model, where each school is kind of like its own serfdom," Bronx librarian and union leader Christina Gavin said.

Many principals are unaware of both the state mandates for libraries and librarians, and of the ways in which a library can benefit their students. In New York City, whether a student receives those benefits comes down to the decisions of individual principals.

"Instead of having standardized operations being pushed out to all the schools, it's inconsistent across the city," said Gavin. She and other advocates, with help from the DOE's Office of Library Services (OLS), have worked to educate principals about the benefits of school libraries, even creating tools to make it much easier for them to search for and hire new librarians. As laudable as these efforts are, passionate librarians like Gavin spend too much of their time advocating for libraries instead of running them.

With enough staff, maybe advocacy wouldn't be such a burden. In an effort to address the shortage of librarians, says OLS director Melissa Jacobs, the office turned to New Visions, the same private organization that received the bulk of Gates' funding to create small schools. Together they created a program called Teacher2Librarian, which subsidizes certified teachers studying for Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degrees, in exchange for three years of service in a public-school library. But this program is not designed to fully close the gap between state mandates and reality.

One place Teacher2Librarian has been successful, says Russell West, a New Visions coordinator of the program, was at the Julia Richman Education Complex on the Upper East Side, once cited in the *New York Times* as "the country's premier example of a large, failing urban high school turned into a peaceful campus of successful small schools." But according to West, the campus had a library that wasn't working. A teacher there took it upon herself to improve the situation and eventually joined New Visions' first cohort in the Teacher2Librarian program.

That success, however, relied on a principal willing and able to support that work. "There's a certain aspect of the principalship that is served by independence," West put it. But that flexibility is also a central flaw in the city's ap-

CHRISTINE LARSEN

proach to education: It relies on the interests and values of individual principals over structural support.

And what about the simple fact that principals who do want to hire a certified librarian can't seem to find candidates for the job? Last spring, Melissa Jacobs was imploring librarians daily to send her their resumes, saying she was getting requests from principals who couldn't find certified librarians to hire. Although the number of MLIS degrees being granted in the New York area continues to rise, there aren't enough graduates who want to get the extra certification that would enable them to work in public schools.

"Libraries should be able, willing, and provided the means with which to adapt to fit the needs of the communities they serve," says Jesse Miglus, a public librarian who got her start in central New York State and now works in Colorado. In school libraries, she says, "sometimes the administration and school board have the librarian's back, but not always."

DISCIPLINE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

The librarian, in transforming into the "library media specialist," is becoming the midwife of bringing children into mass media. We imagine that media literacy education will produce cool, rational, Vulcan information argonauts navigating a "field of options," in the words of anthropologist and philosopher Thomas de Zengotita, and parents and teachers are being told that this is somehow the same thing as literacy.

It is not. We know that digital technologies like smartphones are socially isolating, that time spent on them makes both children and adults less integrated with others.

"One thing I have noticed is that books, like experiences in life, make it into a person's dream life, but the stuff on screens barely does," says Jamieson Webster, a psychoanalyst and author of a recent *New York Times* guest essay about the mental-health crisis among adolescents. "The time spent on the machine is not coming into sessions, it's not coming into their unconscious life. And that means that a huge swath of experience is being deleted constantly."

All this is discouraging for those of us still invested in the idea that widespread literacy is good for democracy. The students who come into the library where I work tell me, over and over, no matter what kind of reader they are, what kinds of stories they seek, that they prefer paper books to digital books.

But when I don't have the book they want in the library, the solution the OLS offers is the Citywide Digital Library, via an app called Sora. Sora, made by a company called Overdrive that contracts with the DOE, makes it possible to read books on a Kindle device with an e-ink screen, which does a better job of replicating the experience of reading a physical book, as it is single-purpose and less straining to the eyes. But only some of the digital titles available are compatible with the Kindle, and the user has to go through multiple extra steps to get a book they've borrowed from Sora's website onto a Kindle.

The Citywide Digital Library was touted as an achievement in access when it was introduced by the OLS during the pandemic, but the children most in need of access to books are the ones least likely to have multiple devices, which means they wind up reading on tablets and smartphones with normal screens. The proponents of digital books as a solution to the access problem miss this reality.

Their implicit argument is also not so different from those made by Netflix or Facebook: That with digital books we can — in theory, someday — feed a student the perfect book tailored to their individual reading level, interests and demographics. But not all students want that. The young Black woman standing in the library, in addition to outright rejecting digital books, tells me that she is tired of books about brilliant Black teens who have to save the universe. She seeks serendipity and privacy, not data-fueled curation.

"Reading a physical book is more direct than reading on my phone," another student told me. The linear, sustained thinking required and nurtured by the reading of a physical book is replaced with the rapid, staccato consumption that an Everything Machine encourages. Learning to hold conflicting ideas in one's mind — what author George Saunders calls the "holy befuddlement" of unanswerable questions — gives way to flipping between alternate realities.

Are we really saying that the role of the library media specialist should be to urge students to give that up in the name of access? Because despite the DOE's protestations of progressivism, many initiatives promoting "access" and "representation" ultimately yoke education to corporations and to an ethos of achievement within the landscape those corporations dominate. They replace literacy and relationships with optionality and efficiency.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The problems facing school libraries are not unknown to decision-makers in and around City Hall. The City Council is putting over $14.4 million toward infrastructure and supplies for school libraries in 2023, the most it has ever appropriated for school libraries, according to a Council spokesperson. But this money does nothing to address the staffing issue.

The DOE's Panel for Education Policy, composed of a mix of mayoral appointees, borough president appointees and community members from each borough, is currently debating whether to include funding for librarians in the base rate that each school receives for its yearly budget. This change would add teeth to the state mandate for librarians in secondary schools, but it seems unlikely to happen: The PEP is going to have to choose between funding librarians or social workers in schools and, according to panel member Dr. Kaliris Salas-Ramirez, it's likely going to choose social workers, given the COVID-19 pandemic's assault on our collective mental health.

The answers to the problems with school may have to come from below, from librarians themselves. But the obsession with digital media is clouding our vision, obscuring what libraries can be for children. The digital-literacy tools given to librarians are 10 years behind in terms of capturing the current information ecosystem, and the rate of change in that ecosystem is only increasing.

I don't mean to suggest that we bury our heads and ignore the march of mass media, or try to completely restructure education to fit some kind of pre-capitalist bucolic fantasy. That is impossible and probably undesirable. Children have the media, and the media have them. I want to suggest that librarians in particular, in the age of information overload, ought to promote an embodied kind of literacy. This doesn't have to mean no longer showing students how to discern good online sources from bad, but it does mean questioning how far that can go in nurturing thoughtful, engaged citizens.

When I asked Jesse Miglus, the public librarian in Colorado, what she wants people to know about what libraries need most right now, she pointed to 1931, when "Library Hero" S. R. Ranganathan proposed his famous five laws of library science:

1. ***Books are for use.***
2. ***Every person his or her book.***
3. ***Every book its reader.***
4. ***Save the time of the reader.***
5. ***A library is a growing organism.***

The ethos of competition and the advance of digital technologies into education work together to undermine these principles. The former fosters neglect of the library's physical space, while the latter is changing the definitions of "book" and "literacy." The result is that we are losing sight of the purpose of a library: to be a physical space where members of a community can participate in a knowledge commons. The mandate for media literacy in schools and the pressing of school librarians into that work has drained the profession of its vital force. The creative work of librarians is being optimized out of existence in favor of frictionless delivery of content — eliminating the emotional and physical inefficiencies of a room full of books.

NINA BERMAN

A UNION LAW FI
LIKE NO OTHER

A SMALL ARMY OF LAW SCHOOL STUDENTS IS HELPING THE AMAZON LABOR UNION

By Katie Pruden & Amba Guerguerian

Seth Goldstein is fast-talking and full of information. He's been a labor lawyer for more than 25 years, the last 16 at the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), and looks the part: in his mid-fifties, a graying head of hair, and always wearing a suit, tie and loafers. He takes calls on-the-go, constantly driving around the Northeast to meet with workers and negotiate labor contracts.

Recently, he's been volunteering for the Amazon Labor Union. The road to that began in late 2015, he recalls: "I was sitting at a cafe in the East Village reading *The Progressive*, and I saw that Menards had a policy in which they were going to cut managers' pay by 60% if a facility unionized." Goldstein knew this was illegal. He called the magazine's editor and asked if anyone had brought a claim against the home-improvement chain store for that policy. No one had. He got to work, on his own time.

"I'd had enough. I was tired of the billionaires telling us what to do. John Menard is very rich," Goldstein says.

After helping win gains for workers at Menards, Goldstein continued to volunteer legal support for workers organizing, at the tech companies Alorica and WeWork. In late 2018, he met with Kickstarter workers trying to organize, and in February 2020, they became the first white-collar tech-company workforce in the United States to unionize, when they voted to join OPEIU Local 153, Goldstein's local.

Goldstein wondered about tackling Amazon, the nation's second largest employer and fierce opponent of unions. He felt that "an intersectional, grassroots, worker-led campaign would work better than traditional labor organizing."

One day in mod-April 2021, he was sitting on his couch after work surfing Twitter, when he saw a tweet from Christian Smalls, president of the newly formed Amazon Labor Union (ALU), requesting an attorney to assist him and other workers fighting to unionize an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island: "Any Union labor lawyers in NY that can assist @amazonlabor please contact me ASAP! We're ready to go!"

Goldstein responded instantaneously. "It's essential to bring together police brutality, Black civil rights, and the labor issue. I felt Chris embodied that," he says. "I knew that an opportunity to be able to represent Amazon workers against Amazon would change labor law, and that's what I wanted to do."

Smalls called him about a week later, and Goldstein was soon spending 20 hours a week as a volunteer lawyer for the ALU, on top of putting in 60-hour weeks for the OPEIU — "working from my kitchen table, using my iPad."

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In April 2022, the ALU became the first union to represent Amazon workers in the United States, winning a union election at the JFK8 warehouse on Staten Island. But it has lost two elections since then, at the LDJ5 facility on Staten Island and at ALB1, near Albany, and is having little luck in forcing Amazon to negotiate a first contract.

Goldstein now has a small army of law-student volunteers assisting him in various legal efforts against Amazon.

A month after the JFK8 victory, he was asked to speak by the student-run Labor and Employment Action Project (LEAP) at Harvard Law School. Third-year law student Maxwell Ulin saw an opportunity and a need he and other students could help fill: The ALU's success had inspired workers at other Amazon warehouses, which meant there was more legal demand than Goldstein could handle.

Other LEAP members and some of Ulin's friends at Yale and New York University law schools were likewise eager to help, and soon they had around 20 students ready to work alongside Goldstein for the ALU.

"The ALU campaign has captured the imagination of labor

RM

supporters and the urge that young people have for correcting the unfairness and inequality that they see in this economy," says Ulin. "The enthusiasm for ALU and unionization among young people currently in law and grad school made it a compelling pitch that drove itself."

The volunteers created a sign-up form, a mailing list, and a resumé review process, and in six months, had amassed 100 volunteers — more than Goldstein knows what to do with. "And now I've had to start turning some away!" he says.

"ALU is not some big established union and they are able to successfully organize, and I think the other side of that, from a law student's perspective is, like, this legal team is really scrappy too," says Anita Alem, a third-year law student at Harvard who started working with Goldstein in May.

Most of the volunteer team's work goes toward filing unfair-labor-practice (ULP) charges against Amazon with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), accusing the company of union-busting tactics illegal under federal labor law, such as interfering in a vote on whether to join a union or firing or punishing workers for being union supporters. The agency, created after the National Labor Relations Act of 1937, is supposed to oversee union elections and protect the rights of organizing workers. If an NLRB regional office finds a ULP charge credible, it issues a "complaint" against the employer and then holds a hearing, roughly equivalent to an indictment and a trial.

If the employer is found guilty of a ULP, however, there is very little the NLRB can do to enforce the law. It has to ask the federal courts to enforce penalties it imposes, and if it finds that a worker was illegally fired, the most it can do is order the company to rehire them and give them back pay — minus anything they've earned on other jobs since they were axed.

In April, after Amazon's union-busting campaign leading up to the JFK8 election, the NLRB ruled against "captive-audience meetings" — anti-union sessions that workers are required to attend by management. Yet, during an ALU union drive that began in June at ALB1 warehouse near Albany, NY, workers reported that they went to anti-union meetings held by Amazon because it was *not made clear* that attendance mandatory. The ALU filed ULPs in retaliation.

"We believe [Amazon's] strategy is to overwhelm not just us, but the government," says Ulin.

Emma Barudi, a second-year student at NYU School of Law, met Goldstein through the Peggy Browning Fellowship, a nationwide fellowship for law students interested in the labor field. She and Goldstein are looking to file a discrimination claim on behalf of a woman after Amazon stopped recognizing her disability. When she submitted a letter from her doctor, the company denied her request for accommodation — and then began to write her up because she wasn't meeting its efficiency quotas.

Discrimination against disabled workers is one of Amazon union supporters' central grievances. The company receives millions in tax breaks each year for hiring disabled workers, but frequently disregards their accommodation needs.

Its efficiency quotas demand highly dangerous work rates. Its intensive computerized tracking tactics can flag workers for "Time Off Task" (TOT) for as little as stretching while on the clock. In one month last summer, three Amazon workers died on the job at different warehouses in New Jersey.

Goldstein and the volunteers are usually connected to potential ULP cases through the ALU. Even Amazon workers who aren't officially with the union go to its members with problems, and they connect the worker with the legal team to figure out if they have a valid case for filing a ULP.

The legal team has also learned about safety concerns through Twitter threads that share stories and photos of unsafe conditions or injuries on the job. One worker tweeted, "Stasis Dermatitis, from being on my feet and walking long distances with steel toe boots. I will have this for the rest of my life."

"Belly button scar from my hernia surgery due to lifting heavy objects," wrote another.

Volunteers also frequently file ULPs for unfair disciplinary actions against organizing workers. In a voice memo that went viral in August when the Coalition to Defend Amazon Workers posted it on Twitter, ALB1 worker Heather Goodall recounted how Amazon disciplined her for being on her cell phone after she used it to take photos of unsafely stacked boxes falling off shelves, "as instructed," with permission of her manager.

According to NLRB records reviewed by *The Indypendent*, Goldstein and his volunteer team have filed 118 ULPs against Amazon in the past year, sifting through details and finding where Amazon has violated some labor law. "It's shocking what a group of law students, not even real lawyers, can help with," said Alem.

Public records filed by Amazon in 2021 indicate the company spent $4.3 million on anti-union legal consultants. Goldstein believes that number is far higher because Amazon was only required to file expenditures on captive audience meetings and not those on other union-avoidance activities. (It should also be noted that the 2021 filing does not account for expenses during the critical period of the JFK8 election or the LDJ5 and ALB1 elections.)

"It's a complete cognitive dissonance, spending their money on lawyers, instead of spending their money on workers," says Emma Barudi.

The legal team, spread over four different time zones, is constantly working. The ALU lost its most recent election at ALB1 by a nearly two-to-one margin. "We filed at least 27 ULPs before and during the critical election period," says Goldstein. The ALU has filed 23 objections to Amazon's conduct during the election, he says, and is looking not just to overturn the election, but for a "bargaining order," in which the NLRB, instead of ordering a revote, says the company has made a fair election impossible and orders it to begin bargaining with the union.

In Moreno Valley, California outside of Los Angeles, workers at the ONT8 warehouse recently filed with the NLRB fo a union election. The struggle continues. As worker-organizers build shop floor support for the union, the legal team continues to pore over Amazon's labor law violations.

"The legal work supports the organizing. You need lawyers to be involved in campaigns," says Goldstein. "The problem is that a campaign of organizing will be crushed unless you have the support from people who know what the process is. On the flipside, lawsuits don't get you a contract alone — it has to be in the context of worker engagement and organizing."

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The volunteer team meets weekly on Zoom. A rotating group of 15-20 students attends and picks up tasks.

"Seth is always so appreciative of the students," says Alem. "I don't think I've ever had a conversation with him where he wasn't like, 'Thank you so much for the work you're doing' — even if it was a thirty-second call."

"I don't expect everybody to be involved all the time because they're law students," says Goldstein. "These are very talented, highly educated, empathetic individuals that could make a lot of money working for corporations, but they've chosen to work on behalf of workers. That's a wonderful thing. When I was growing up, my generation just wanted to get a job and make a lot of money."

He supposes millennials and Gen Zers are more socially active in general than their predecessors because they don't have a choice. "The issues are greater," he says. "When I was in college, my tuition was $750. I didn't have any student debt. I wasn't facing the extermination of human life because of corporate greed. I didn't have to deal with corporations like those in Big Tech. It's craziness. We didn't have Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk."

Goldstein, now a socialist, says he "accidentally" got involved with labor law. Coming from a moderate-Republican family in Rochester, he wasn't interested in the labor movement, but, as he was looking for a job after law school, he met an attorney for the Con Edison union, Utility Workers Union of America Local 1-2, through one of his wife's friends. At first, he thought it would be a temporary stint, but after a few months, he fell in love with the job.

His workload has slightly lessened with the volunteer team's support but he considers himself a workaholic, and says that especially with this work, there is no time to rest. "We are truly living in — as they say in *Succession* — 'a shit show in a fuck factory,'" he said. "All of us work a lot, but sometimes you have to do that."

To avoid getting burnt out by their workload, the students and Goldstein turn to different strategies.

Barudi has "a relatively long skin-care routine that I get made fun of by some of my friends, but by doing it every night, it calms me down and helps me focus on something really small."

"In my spare time, I read. I walk around my neighborhood. I spend time with my family," said Goldstein. He lives in southern New Jersey near Philadelphia with his wife and has two daughters that have flown the nest.

Goldstein soon won't be volunteering for the ALU any more. He accepted an offer to become a full-time lawyer for Julien Mirer & Singla, a law firm that has represented both the ALU and the Trader Joe's United union.

"It's the most left-wing, worker-rights-oriented law firm in New York City," he says. "They're committed to social change."

ALU'S VOLUNTEER LEGAL TEAM, SPREAD OVER FOUR TIME ZONES, IS CONSTANTLY WORKING.

WORKER-LED UNION: *Chris Smalls, President of the Amazon Labor Union, at a Labor Day march in Midtown Manhattan that included workers from Starbucks Workers United, Trader Joes United and several established unions.*

TEAMWORK: *(From left to right) Amazon Labor Union attorney Seth Goldstein, law school student volunteers Abby Frerick and Emma Barudi and ALU's Chris Smalls.*

NEW YORK'S MIDTERM DEBACLE

A CASCADING SERIES OF BLUNDERS BY LEADING NY DEMOCRATS HANDED HALF OF CONGRESS TO THE REPUBLICANS. CAN THE STATE PARTY'S DYSFUNCTION BE REVERSED?

By John Tarleton

This year's midterm elections saw the much-anticipated Republican "red wave" turn into a red trickle in most of the country with one glaring exception: bright blue New York.

President Joe Biden won the state by 23 points in 2020. Democrats control all of New York's statewide offices and wield super-majorities in both houses of the state legislature. National Democrats expected that the party's control over the once-in-a decade redistricting process would help shore up its razor-thin congressional majority.

Instead of expanding their majority, New York Democrats lost four congressional seats in an election in which their party didn't lose more than two seats in any other state. Meanwhile, as *The Indypendent* goes to press, the Republicans appear headed for a tiny (one to three seat) House majority once all the mail-in votes are counted in California. The New York Dems' debacle will be the difference between ceding control of the House of Representatives to a MAGA heavy Republican caucus intent on creating partisan gridlock as opposed to continuing Democratic control of the White House and Congress that would make more progressive legislation possible during the second two years of the Biden administration.

There was no one cause, nor one culprit, for the New York Dems' face plant. Instead, the causes of their failure flowed into each other as tributaries forming a mighty stream of hubris, incompetence and cronyism that would lay waste to their own electoral aspirations and that of Democrats across the country.

A JOURNEY IN 11 STEPS

1. STATE SENATE LEADERS RUSH A TOP COURT PICK

Madeline Singas was a controversial choice to join the New York Court of Appeals (the state's highest court) when she was nominated by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in May 2021. Singas, the Nassau County DA, was a career prosecutor who once redacted information from a police report that could have helped prove the innocence of three men that were wrongfully convicted of double murder and spent 24 years behind bars before being released in 2021.

Singas is well to the right ideologically of the Senate Democrats, including Deputy Majority Leader Michael Gianaris who championed the nomination of his fellow Greek American. Five state senators led by Julia Salazar (D-Brooklyn) wrote a public letter opposing Singas' nomination. Salazar told The Indypendent she thought she could rally enough Democratic votes to block Singas's confirmation. But the fix was in. Two weeks after her nomination, the State Senate leadership brought Singas's nomination to the floor. They took advantage of pandemic-era rules to rush her nomination through while several senators were outside the Senate chamber. Singas got her 14-year term on the high court. It wouldn't take long for Gianaris and his Senate colleagues to rue the day they put her there. (200)

2. KATHY HOCHUL TAKES COMMAND, SORT OF

Cuomo resigned in disgrace in August 2021 after being credibly accused of sexual harassment by 11 women. His Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul was sworn in as New York's first governor. She soon won praise from fellow Albany politicos for running her administration in a more collegial manner than the vengeful Cuomo. At the same time, she quickly took advantage of the power of her office and New York's lax campaign-finance laws to raise tens of millions of dollars from the same wealthy special interests that bankrolled Cuomo. With a huge campaign warchest, she could look forward to mimicking Cuomo's tried-and-tested electoral strategy: Carpet bomb New York with television and digital ads while doing minimal in-person campaigning. Hochul also decided to keep Jay Jacobs, a longtime Cuomo ally, as the head of the New York State Democratic Party despite the grumblings of progressives.

3. DEMS GO TO SLEEP ON A KEY BALLOT INITIATIVE

With redistricting coming up in 2021, Albany Democrats put a measure on the ballot to ensure that the courts would not take over the process if a bipartisan commission could not agree on new legislative maps. New York Republicans spent $3 million to oppose the initiative and toured the state to rally opposition to it. The New York Democratic Party spent no money nor did they campaign for the measure which was defeated. Jacobs had other priorities at the time, namely stopping India Walton, a socialist who won the Democratic primary in the Buffalo mayor's race. Jacobs backed Buffalo's incumbent mayor, who ran as a write-in candidate, while denouncing Walton, a Black woman, as being the political equivalent of a former KKK grand wizard. Walton would ultimately lose. Hochul ignored renewed calls for Jacobs' resignation.

4. DEM LEGISLATORS PASS REDISTRICTING MAPS

After the bipartisan redistricting commission failed to agree on new maps, responsibility for completing redistricting shifted to the Democratic-led state legislature. In February, the legislature released maps that would have put the Dems on track to win 22 out of 26 seats statewide. New York City's only Republican district, NY-11, was redrawn to loop in heavily Democratic Sunset Park and Park Slope to offset conservative-leaning Staten Island. A district that would have pitted Park Slope stroller moms against retired Staten Island cops in the middle of the largest media market in the country would have been a culture-war blockbuster for the ages. But alas, it was not meant to be.

5. SINGAS DELIVERS THE DECISIVE VOTE

After their stinging defeat in the legislature, the Republicans decided to go shopping. Judge shopping, that is. They found a sympathetic district judge in Steuben County, in New York's rural Southern Tier, who ruled that the legislature's maps violated the state constitution. The case made its way to the Court of Appeals where a 4-3 majority upheld the lower court. Chief Judge Janet DiFiore, a close ally of Andrew Cuomo, authored the majority opinion. Madeline Singas delivered the decisive fourth vote. The case was remanded to Judge Patrick McAlister in Steuben County who was given the final say over redistricting.

6. HOCHUL RAIDS CONGRESS FOR A NEW LT. GOV

Hochul originally tapped Harlem State Senator Brian Benjamin to be her lieutenant governor. Benjamin brought racial and gender diversity to the ticket as well as regional balance with Hochul being from Western New York. He also brought five indictments on federal corruption charges that were announced by federal prosecutors on April 12. Whoops!

Hochul quickly sacked Benjamin and replaced him with Antonio Delgado, a Hudson Valley congressman who had won two hard-fought races in 2018 and 2022 in New York's 19th congressional district. Delgado's departure would put Dems at a disadvantage in a key swing district.

7. THE FINAL MAPS

The final redistricting maps were released on May 21. A swath of light blue districts were established across the Hudson Valley and Long Island that could be flipped if the Democrats faltered in what was expected to be a red wave year.

8. SEAN PATRICK MALONEY PUTS HIMSELF FIRST

Fleeing for higher ground in the face of an expected red wave, Democratic Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney took advantage of the chaos unleashed by the new congressional maps to abandon NY-18, the district in the Hudson Valley he repped for 10 years, to run in the slightly more Democratic-leaning NY-17.

The only problem was this district already had a Democratic congressman, Mondaire Jones, a Black, gay progressive who was elected to a first term in 2020 by 24 points. Jones decided not to duke it out with his senior colleague. Instead, he moved 30 miles south to Brooklyn to run for a newly created seat but fell short in that primary. Maloney's selfishness was all the more stunning given that he was the head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the very group in charge of defending and expanding the Democratic majority.

Maloney used a 10-1 fundraising advantage to crush a subsequent primary challenge from progressive State Senator Alessandra Biaggi who he denounced for being a bail reform supporter. On primary night, Maloney crowed that his victory was a win for "common-sense Democrats" who reject "defund the police" radicals. The tables would soon be turned on Maloney.

9. NYC MAYOR STOKES A CRIME PANIC

No politician has worked harder to revive the 1970s-era image of New York as a crime-ridden hellhole than Mayor Eric Adams. The former NYPD police captain teamed up with the *New York Post* in 2021 to ride fear of rising crime all the way to City Hall. The murder rate jumped in 2020 amid pandemic lockdowns and then plateaued in 2021. Since becoming mayor, Adams has continued to stoke crime fears, claiming that NYC was experiencing the same level of violence as the early 1990s when the murder rate was five times higher than it is today. As for the *Post*, it delivers a steady drumbeat of sensational, crime-themed cover stories — and local television news often follows suit with similar coverage.

Adams' success in turning a crime panic into electoral gold inspired his centrist Democratic allies. They launched similarly lurid attacks in New York City Council and state legislative races. Their targets: leftwing candidates from the Working Families Party and the Democratic Socialists of America. Adams fearmongering also provided bipartisan validation for little-known Republican gubernatorial candidate Lee Zeldin who ran a one-note campaign about crime. With a boost from the *Post*, his polling numbers soared in September and October. In the race's final days, Zeldin pulled to within a few points of Hochul. Adams' alarming rhetoric and over-the-top media coverage had also had a powerful effect on the surrounding suburbs.

10. HOCHUL'S LISTLESS CAMPAIGN

Kathy Hochul started her election campaign as an overwhelming

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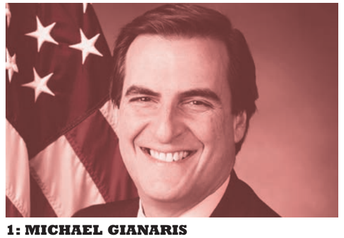


1: MICHAEL GIANARIS

2: KATHY HOCHUL

3: JAY JACOBS

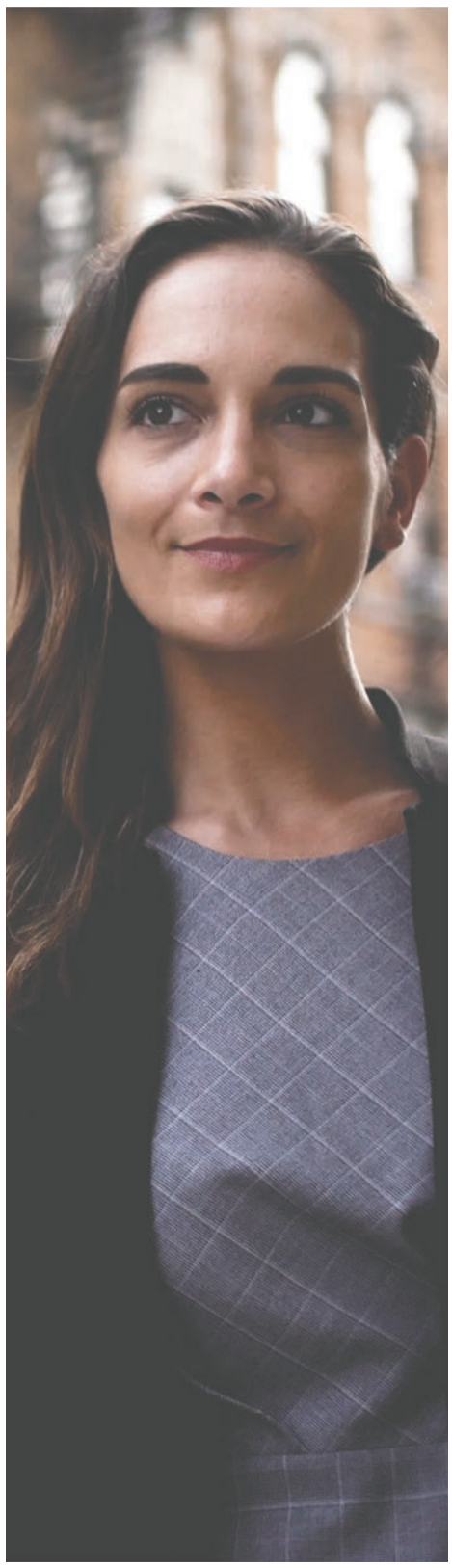
5: MADELINE SINGAS

6: ANTONIO DELGADO

8: SEAN PATRICK MALONEY

9: ERIC ADAMS

MARIA ORDONEZ



JULIA SALAZAR

NEW YORK DEMOCRATS

Continued from previous page

favorite and then ran like she was in a witness protection program. There was little in the way of voter outreach. "No text, no phone calls, zero campaign volunteers in my neighborhood," tweeted a concerned Democrat in Forest Hills, Queens. "No idea what the Hochul campaign is doing." When it became clear that Hochul just might lose the race, the Working Families Party leapt into action in the final two weeks of the campaign and launched phone banks and door-to-door canvasses. Hochul would ultimately prevail by six points. She won New York by 17 points less than Biden did in 2020, the worst underperformance by any Democratic governor in 2022. While she survived, her weak showing at the top of the ticket took a toll on down-ballot candidates.

11. MALONEY CAUGHT BY SURPRISE

After Sean Patrick Maloney bulldozed his way into NY-17, he had a lot of new constituents to win over. A post-election report in Slate suggests he barely tried. When Maloney wasn't antagonizing or ignoring local grassroots groups, he disappeared on an October junket to Europe. Late in his race, Maloney realized he was in danger of losing. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee he was in charge of shifted money from toss-up races on the West Coast to prop up Maloney. He lost anyway as did the candidates in O-6 and CA-27 who were defunded on his behalf. The Dems also narrowly lost Antonio Delgado's old seat further up the Hudson Valley plus two more seats in the suburbs of Long Island. Maloney pointed to Hochul's lackluster performance and the role of the media in whipping up a crime panic whose blast radius extended far into the suburbs outside New York City. As for his own shortcomings, he had little to offer.

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Since election day, calls have grown for State Party Chair Jay Jacobs to step down. On Nov. 14, more than 1,000 elected officials, party leaders and organizers signed a letter urging Gov. Hochul to dismiss Jacobs. While many of the signatories were progressives who had previously clashed with Hochul and the party establishment, they were joined by normie Democrats such as State Senators Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan) and Andrew Gounardes (D-Brooklyn).

The reformers say they want a new leader who can unify the left and the center of the party to better fight the Republicans instead of each other. Hochul waved away critics, many of whom had just rescued her faltering campaign. She insisted she would keep Jacobs and vowed to oversee the party's rebuilding herself.

"There's a lot of different ideas for how to get to basically the same result and I'm the person who has to be responsible for that," Hochul said. "I gratefully own that mantle." Translation: You can run along now.

Amid the clamor for the New York Dems to change their ways, it begs the question, what exactly is the Democratic Party? Is it a brand? Is it elected public officeholders, staffers, candidates and campaign consultants? A collection of bank accounts stuffed with contributions from wealthy special interests looking to turn money into political favors? A political safe harbor for historically marginalized groups who are threatened by the Christian nationalist white supremacy of the other major political party? The repository for goodwill generated by the party's past ties to the New Deal and the Civil Rights eras? A political battleground where a fraught coalition of capitalist class interests and grassroots social reformers are constantly vying for power, resources and control of a ballot line of incomparable political value?

The Democratic Party is the world's longest enduring political party. Founded in 1832, its architect was New York governor and future president Martin Van Buren, the original machine politician. Over nearly two centuries, the party has been all over the political map — from defending slavery and states rights in the 19th Century, to becoming the party of the New Deal and civil rights in the 20th Century to aligning itself with corporate-friendly neoliberalism in recent decades — but like the Republican Party it has never been controlled by its grassroots base.

Here in New York, the institutional Democratic Party over the past decade became a "cheering squad for Andew Cuomo" says George Albro, co-chair of the New York Progressive Action Network (NYPAN). The party apparatus was further distorted, Albro says, by Cuomo's penchant for enabling alliances between Republicans and rogue Democratic legislators in order to stave off progressive demands on his administration.

Cuomo's autocratic reign overlapped with a surge in left electoral campaigns in New York. These came after Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential run showed working-class champions could be a force in electoral politics. Bartender-turned-political phenom Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was elected to Congress in 2018. Progressives rode a blue wave and flipped the State Senate later that year. Eight democratic socialists have been elected to the legislature, the largest such bloc in modern U.S. history.

Cuomo resigned in disgrace last year, but the state party he fostered is still attuned to fighting the left instead of the right. How to engage (or not) the Democratic Party has bedeviled the left for over a century. For a rising new generation that has jumped into electoral politics, the calculations are additionally complex.

Maria Ordoñez, 23, joined NYPAN in the wake of Sanders' 2016 campaign and finished second in a crowded field when she ran for a city council seat in 2021. In June, she garnered more than 5300 votes to became the first non-machine candidate from West Harlem's Assembly District 70 to win a seat on the New York State Democratic Committee in decades.

Ordoñez signed the petition calling for Jacobs' ouster and is hopeful Hochul will yield as more party officials voice their displeasure. She also uses her position's bully pulpit to advocate for issues such as affordable housing that are of concern to her community and helps constituents with accessing government services.

"It's what you make of it," Ordoñez said of her position.

Being on the State Committee has allowed her to see the workings of the party up close. Progressives now make up 20% of the state committee, Ordoñez says. They are treated to emails from Jacobs boasting of his accomplishments. In September, the Committee re-elected Jacobs by voice vote lest dissidents have a chance to put their opposition on the record. Despite the hostility progressives face from the party establishment, Ordoñez vows not to walk away.

"I think that the way to create change is through going inside [the party] and getting people involved," Ordoñez added. "To ignore the Democratic Party is like trying to cover the sun with one finger."

In 2018, Julia Salazar became the first open socialist elected to the state legislature in almost a century and at 28 years old she became the youngest woman to ever serve in the New York State Senate. She has called for Jacobs' resignation since last year. She also signed the petition calling for Jacobs' ouster, but doubts it will have any effect. With Hochul safely re-elected and set to wield power for the next four years, most prominent New York Democrats are publicly avoiding the controversy.

"I think they have no motivation to lead in any meaningful way," Salazar said of the party's leaders. "Virtually all of them were born into the political class. And the status quo works for them, even when it's not at all working for the vast majority of New Yorkers."

While she's "begrudgingly" a Democrat, Salazar says she prefers to focus on building her home organization, the New York City chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. The DSA is a member-led organization which in New York has knocked off a slew of entrenched incumbents in recent years and is active in the militant wing of the labor movement.

"It is strategic and practical for everyone left of center who has electoral politics as a part of our theory of change to continue to participate in Democratic Party politics," Salazar said. "But we have to simultaneously be building something that is beyond capitalism and is resistant to it and actually represents the interests of working people. Otherwise we're going to see the Democratic Party continue to reach the limit of being able to represent people's interests, because its interests are always going to be split between capital and the wealthy versus the working class."

DANIEL ATONNA

ORGANIZING GETS THE GOODS: *Members of For the Many, Citizen Action and Tenants PAC celebrate their victory.*

KINGSTON RGB CUTS RENTS BY 15 PERCENT!

LANDLORDS OUTRAGED BY FIRST-EVER ROLLBACK

By Steven Wishnia

On Nov. 9, Kingston's newly established Rent Guidelines Board did what New York City has never done in its more than 50 years of rent stabilization: It voted 6-3 to lower rents by 15% for tenants renewing their leases in the next year.

The Hudson River city of 24,000 enacted rent stabilization in July. The regulations cover 64 buildings with just over 1,300 apartments, about 22% of the city's roughly 5,900 rental units, based on a vacancy study the city conducted in April and May. The rest are exempted by the state Emergency Tenant Protection Act (ETPA) because they are in buildings with less than six apartments or were built after the law was enacted in 1974.

After several hours of public hearings where person after person testified about having to spend 60% of their income on rent, "it became really clear that a reduction was the only reasonable choice," says Carolina Soto, one of the two tenant representatives on the RGB.

The board also authorized tenants whose rents have risen by more than 15% since the beginning of 2019 to file appeals with the state Office of Rent Administration. Landlords would have to justify the increases by showing they'd made major improvements, says Michael Tierney, the other tenant representative.

The unprecedented rent reduction came as a result of two things: A drastic increase in housing costs in the past six years, as people moving out of New York City flooded the Hudson Valley market; and intensive grass-roots organizing.

Housing prices "have gone bananas in Kingston," says Tyler Vanderhaag, Citizen Action's Hudson Valley lead organizer. The city on the Hudson River is touted as "the new Brooklyn." Landlords have been flipping buildings, raising rents by as much as 70% during the pandemic, and displacing longtime residents, says Alderwoman Michele Hirsch, and apartments being converted to AirBnB rentals is another problem.

More than half of Kingston's rent-stabilized apartments are in four large complexes, the biggest being Stony Run, a 266-unit garden-apartment development on the city's outskirts, west of the New York State Thruway.

On Aug. 6, five days after the rent-stabilization law went into effect, Stony Run residents received what Soto, who lives there, calls "the blackmail letter" from the landlord: If they signed a new lease within two weeks, their rent would go up by 18%. If they signed by the end of October, they'd get a 30% increase. If they hadn't signed by then, their rent would go up to $2,200 a month.

Demanding those increases before the rent board voted was illegal, Soto says.

The Beacon-based real-estate investment firm Aker purchased Stony Run and three other properties from E&M Management for $81 million in January 2021. E&M had acquired the four between 2016 and 2019 for $55 million, according to *The Real Deal* trade journal. Aker says it focuses on deindustrialized small cities that "will be new culture and innovation hubs" where people work from home.

Rents at Stony Run start at $1,790 for a one-bedroom apartment. But that doesn't include fees, says Soto: $25 a month for garbage collection; $25 for parking; water and sewage charges; and Aker wants to tack on $65 more for "amenities" — what tenants say is "a pool that isn't open and a fitness center that is still under construction." If renters have a cat or dog, that's another $50 a month.

Meanwhile, tenants complain about sewage backing up into their bathtubs and black mold on their walls.

Kingston tenants began organizing several years ago, but it intensified as the Common Council began considering rent control again this year. Soto, who was a Central America-solidarity activist in the 1980s, began organizing a tenant association, her first foray into housing issues.

Hudson Valley activist groups including For the Many, Citizen Action, the Democratic Socialists of America, and Assemblymember-elect Sarahana Shrestha's campaign joined in, going door-to-door to tell residents about their rights under rent stabilization, and helping with logistics and technical advice. They were "not intrusive, but so helpful," says Soto.

"We knocked on doors in every ETPA-covered building," says Vanderhaag. "The number-one thing we were hearing was that it was too little, too late. The rents were already too high." One elderly woman said her rent was more than her income, says Aaron Narraph Fernando of For the Many.

They decided to seek a 30% rent rollback, and concentrated on turning out tenants for the RGB's public hearings. At the first one, tenants and supporters testifying outnumbered landlords and property managers by three to one. At the second, more than 50 tenants and only two landlords spoke, says Narraph Fernando.

"They decided they couldn't out-organize us," he says.

Instead, owners turned to the courts. In late October, the Hudson Valley Property Owners Association filed a lawsuit to block Kingston's rent-stabilization law. The group, whose website declares "rent control is a cancer that kills cities," argues that the city Office of Housing Initiatives survey that found the vacancy rate was below 5% — required to find a "housing emergency" under the ETPA — was invalid because it counted buildings where the landlord had not responded as having no vacancies, and illegal because the city Common Council hadn't authorized it.

Kingston was the first city in upstate New York to enact rent stabilization after it was authorized by the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019. But its first attempt, in 2020, fell through when a survey found a 6.7% vacancy rate. "Landlords were warehousing apartments," says Hirsch. This year's survey found a vacancy rate of 1.6%. Even if all the 33 apartments where the owners or property managers did not respond were counted as vacant, it says, the rate would have been 4.2%.

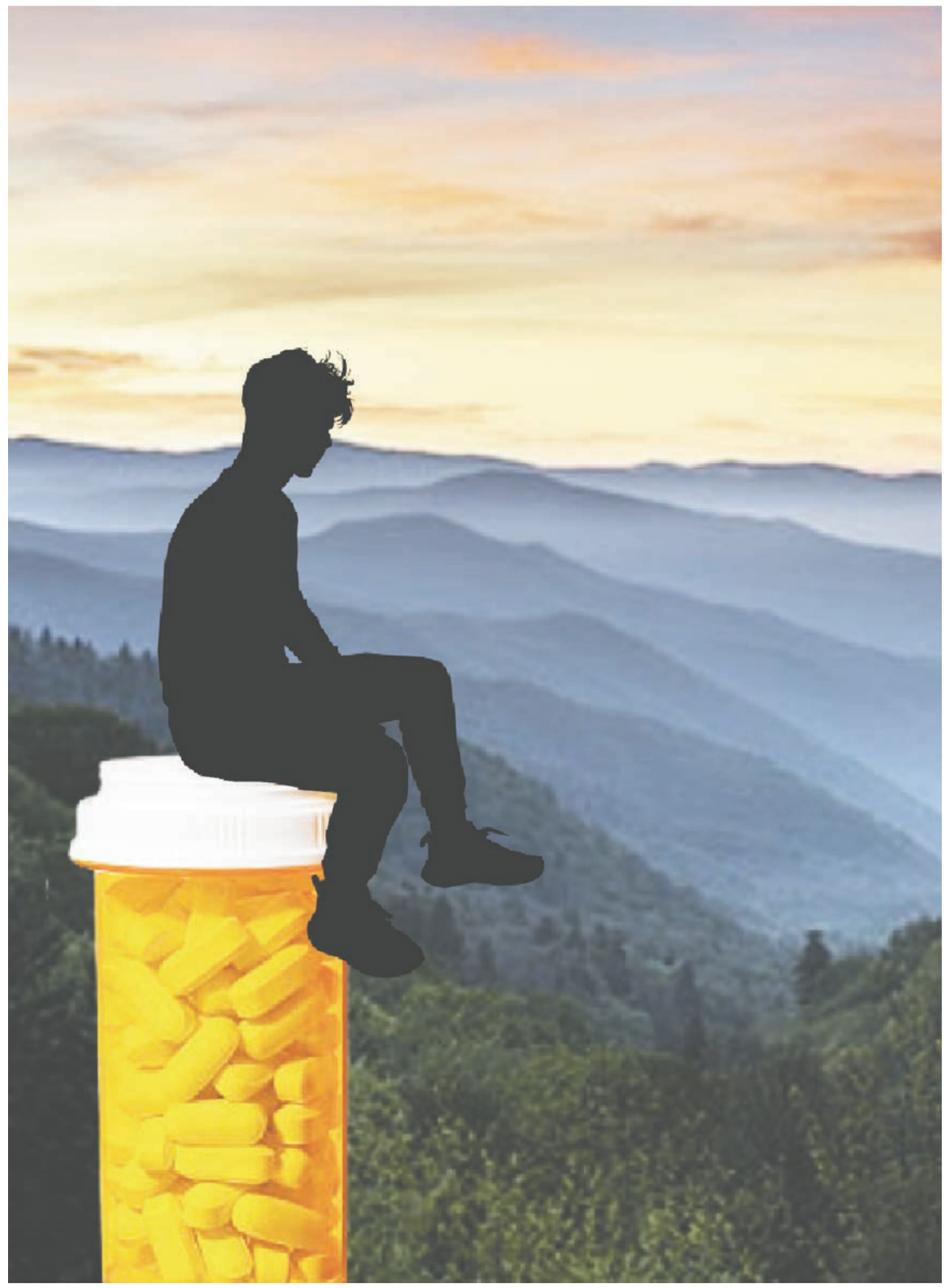
The landlords' claims "really don't have any weight," says Hirsch. The Common Council did not vote on the 2022 survey because "we did it in house, so we didn't have to approve any payment."

"It's really monumental," Tierney says of the rent reduction. "I really hope it inspires some of the other cities and towns in the Hudson Valley."

A CHARLES DICKENS CLASSIC RECAST IN 21ST CENTURY APPALACHIA

Demon Copperhead
BY BARBARA KINGSOLVER
HARPER, OCTOBER 2022, 560 PAGES

By Jessica Max Stein


KATHERINE KANE

What if you rewrote the Charles Dickens classic *David Copperfield*, but set it in a contemporary Appalachia wracked by the opioid crisis, in order to make the point that the income inequality and human exploitation of the Victorian era are still with us? Sounds impossible, right? Yet this is exactly Barbara Kingsolver's ambition in her ninth and latest novel, *Demon Copperhead*, and miraculously it works.

Why does it work? The engaging voice of the title character carries the book. Kingsolver has a special flair for first person narration — her 1998 novel *The Poisonwood Bible* involved five different narrators, each instantly recognizable — and *Demon Copperhead* is one of her strongest narrators yet. His birth name is Damon Fields, but he soon acquires his nickname due to his rebellious attitude and bright red hair.

Damon's short, declarative sentences paint his life with a wry sense of humor and an artist's eye. A love interest has "grey manga eyes." When Damon talks about finding opportunities to make out with girls in middle school, he says, "We were too young yet to do anything in cars like normal kids, but where there's a will there's a couch." Kingsolver even manages to communicate to the reader things Damon doesn't know. When he explains to a friend that he was born in the amniotic sac, she says, "You were born in the caul."

"Yeah, that," he replies, not understanding. "I had the call."

Being born in the caul is just the beginning of Damon's, well, Dickensian life. His father dies before he is born; his alcoholic, pill-addicted teen mother struggles to raise him; his stepfather abuses him; his mother ODs on his 11th birthday; he is shipped off to various horrifying foster care placements, where he's neglected, underfed and exploited; by fifth grade, he's working in a meth lab — and this is just the first third of the book.

This chockablock plot is slowed down by Damon being a relatively passive protagonist, unable or unwilling to direct his own fate. Yet this makes sense when you think about Kingsolver's aims. This novel is no *Hillbilly Elegy*, the best-selling bootstrap Appalachia memoir. While Damon is exceptional in some ways (a tireless worker, a talented artist, socially adept, remarkably resilient), the point is not that he is exceptional but that he is typical. He is meant to be representative. He is not "the one that gets away"; he doesn't even want to leave; when given the chance to live among a number of places (including some offering more opportunity) ,he chooses to stay in Lee County, Virginia.

His friends and community largely drive his decision to stay put. Kingsolver laudably rises to the challenge of modernizing David Copperfield's two-dozen-plus characters. The characters are generally nuanced and vivid, most dealing with similar struggles of circumstance. Interestingly, Kingsolver makes Damon's steadfast friend Matt "Maggot" Peggot a gay male, though the original character's equivalent is a straight female. The update works, as the oppression translates. Some of the book's antagonists are rather two-dimensional, especially pill-pushing pharmaceutical salesman Kent and hulking bully U-Haul, but they ably serve their purpose.

Ironically, while Lee County's lack of opportunity accounts for many of its residents' troubles, Damon's sense of place is one of his main saving graces. He clearly loves his home, Virginia's westernmost county, sandwiched in between Tennessee and Kentucky. He cherishes the information about the natural world passed down from an elderly neighbor: which mushrooms are edible, which plants are medicinal, which snakes are dangerous. He thrives in the land-based economy where neighbors share and barter, at sea in the city where money is the only currency.

As Damon learns the history of Appalachia and its people, his confidence grows. Kingsolver, who has set several of her novels in her native Appalachia, is occasionally pedantic in delivering this information, planting speeches in the mouth of a preachy teacher, but it's worth it to witness Damon's increasing empowerment. He is proud to learn that the word "redneck" derives from the Battle of Blair Mountain, when the coal companies unleashed federal troops against striking miners. The fighting workers signaled their loyalty by wearing red bandannas around their necks. "People calling us rednecks, that goes back to the red bandannas," Damon says. "Redneck is badass."

A fellow foster kid helps Damon realize that the struggles of Lee County (and places like it) derive not from individual failure, but from corporate malice. The coal companies deliberately blocked the development of other industry, so locals had no choice but to sell their souls to the company store; decades later, Big Pharma stepped in to fill the void.

"They did this to us," Damon realizes. He ends up writing a graphic novel about this history, turning his newfound pride and knowledge into art.

Kingsolver is clearly trying to humanize a population often demonized by the left. When Damon reclaims the word "hillbilly," he muses on similarly reclaimed terms: "All down the years, words have been flung like pieces of shit, only to get stuck on a truck bumper with up-yours pride. Rednecks, moonshiners, ridge runners, hicks. Deplorables." Kingsolver ends the chapter on that last word rather than dealing with its implications, saying little else about electoral politics. This omission seems problematic, and one could argue that Kingsolver's humanizing sometimes tips into romanticizing.

The story unfolds naturally and rapidly, like a line of dominoes, the various plot points connected, even inevitable in hindsight. The reader sees how addiction is not one moment or one choice, but an immersion so subtle and gradual as to be almost imperceptible. The plot's one false note is its climax scene; even Damon sees that he's making a bad choice, and it seems out of character for this model of resilience to be quite so self-destructive. Yet the tragic consequences of this scene give Damon the impetus he needs to get his life together.

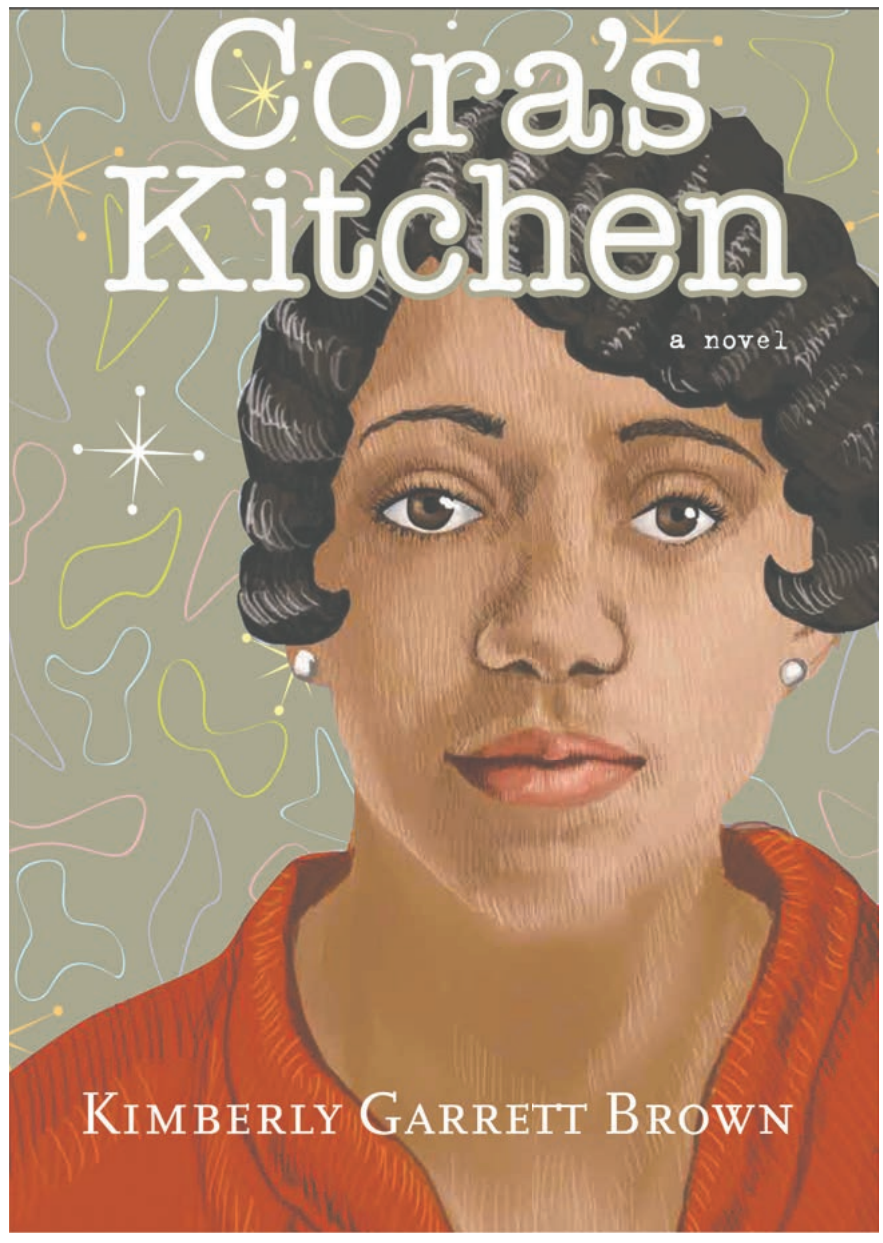
Ultimately, like its 19th century predecessor, *Demon Copperfield* is a coming of age story, so its underlying question is the same as in the original: will our protagonist become the hero of his own life? Will he exercise agency, take action, take charge? It's probably not a spoiler that the answer is yes.

RACE, CLASS & THE LIMITS OF FRIENDSHIP

Cora's Kitchen
By Kimberly Garrett Brown
Inanna Press, September 2022, 280 pages

By Eleanor J. Bader

When Cora first met Earl, she was an aspiring novelist and he an aspiring musician. His dream was eventually fulfilled with a full-time gig playing bass in a Harlem club. Cora, however, faced a different reality. Children came quickly after the couple married, and while she had no choice but to work outside the home to make ends meet, there was little time for creative pursuits. Still, she held fast to her goal.



Cora's Kitchen takes place in 1928 and offers readers a vivid description of her work as a New York City librarian. It was there, in the 135th Street branch, that she met Langston Hughes and other literary luminaries. Hughes, who was enrolled as an undergraduate at Lincoln University at the time, was already a published poet. Despite his youth, he became a catalyst, prodding Cora to read Walt Whitman, Dorothy West and Zora Neale Hurston. He further encouraged her to jot down ideas, impressions and phrases as they bubbled up.

But shortly after Cora's friendship with Hughes begins to take shape, her cousin Agnes is badly beaten by her abusive spouse. Her injuries are so severe that she has to take a leave of absence from her job as a household cook. Family members beg Cora to fill in. Although she initially bristles at the idea of domestic labor — even as a temporary stint — she ultimately finds the job to her liking. Indeed, in contrast to the bustling library, cooking for a four-person household is so undemanding that she is able to carve out several hours each afternoon to read and write.

Her unconventional new employer, Eleanor Fitzgerald — a progressive, if extremely rich, white feminist with a penchant for radical ideas — encourages this. When she learns of Cora's aspirations, and reads samples of her work, she offers to become her patron. The proposal involves giving Cora a stipend so that she can write full-time during the upcoming summer. What's more, it includes room and board at an upstate New York cottage that Eleanor owns.

Yes, it sounds like a dream come true, but like many seemingly-golden opportunities, there are unsettling undercurrents surrounding the offer. In fact, Cora is well aware that the arrangement is fraught and hesitates before finally accepting it, fearful that the racial dynamics will lead to ostracism or worse from their respective communities.

Throughout, Brown maintains a light hand in presenting Cora's concerns. Indeed, as *Cora's Kitchen* interrogates the interplay of race and class in each woman's life, the emotional toll of racism and classism are laid bare. It's beautifully rendered.

As Cora explains, "Eleanor, I never thought a white woman and a black woman could have a real friendship. You have been one of the best friends I ever had. You understand me in ways no one ever has. But there is still a big difference between us. People see you and assume the best. They want to make the world right for you. They see me and they see the worst. They are all just waiting for confirmation of every negative thing they have ever thought of colored people. The proper language and appropriate dress is an act to them."

Ninety-four years later, this assertion continues to be true, a horrifying reminder, should we need one, of how little has changed.

All told, *Cora's Kitchen* is a masterful look at the many ways in which racism, classism and misogyny overlap and oppress. And while I found the denouement somewhat unsatisfying — simultaneously glib and overly open-ended — the novel nonetheless illustrates the possibilities of true solidarity and support, person to person, woman to woman, and writer to writer.

MEXICANOS UNIDOS

Continued from page 4

What you're describing reminds me that in organizing, being able to offer people a vision of the positive is so crucial. It can't just all be about protests, or even self-education. Things like the Plaza give people a vision that they can get excited about.

Thank you. Yeah! Franz Fanon mentions why celebration is so important for the oppressed, because we get to shake all that oppression out of us. And we got to, like, not have to use horizontal violence onto each other in the streets. But now we can dance together and shake all of these things out of our body.

What was the inspiration for the plaza?

One of the main ones was Chicano Park in San Diego and others out in Colorado. These cultural pillars that help with resistance movements. Another motivation was Industry City, a gentrifying entity coming into Sunset Park. Also the homicides and the robberies of street vendors, the dumping of their of their property by parks police. NYPD is ticketing ladies for selling mango on the street and in the subway.

I noticed a man wearing a Che Mario shirt at the Plaza debrief. How do you think being involved in the Plaza and practicing direct democracy is affecting people's ideologies?

Well, you do have to remember that in general in Latin America, people are more radical. They have more leftist histories. But also I've definitely noticed that the plaza has created more of a collective awareness and combatted individualism.

So, what is the goal or vision of Mexicanos Unidos?

To help build a revolutionary socialist party, and to organize the lumpenproletariat (including but not limited to the unemployed, marginally employed, undocumented and welfare recipients), which are the most dispossessed and stand to gain the most from socialism.

Do the vendors know you're a bunch of commies?

Yeah! We're open with them about that. But we also try not to beat them over the head with it.

For more, see @mexicanosxunidos and @plazatonatiuh on Instagram or email mexicanosxunidos@gmail.com.

MIKE DAVIS'S FORGOTTEN FIRST BOOK

Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class
By Mike Davis
Verso, 1986, 320 pages

By Steven Sherman

Mike Davis, who died Oct. 25 at the age of 76, was a prolific author, a Marxist urban scholar and former truckdriver with a working-class perspective often rare in leftist academics of the last generation. His best-known book was *City of Quartz*, a dystopian analysis of how Los Angeles was shaped, but his works included the sort-of-followup *Ecology of Fear; Planet of Slums*; and histories of the car bomb, global pandemics, famines and imperialism in the late 19th century, and activism in L.A. in the 1960s.

Tributes to him have zeroed in on *City of Quartz* as his most important work. Largely ignored has been his first book, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class*, from 1986. This is unfortunate, as it may be his richest work. Davis was unequivocally writing in the Marxist tradition, but his work breaks with the two more heralded Marxist texts of the period, *Fredric Jameson's Postmodernism,* or the *Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism and David Harvey's Condition of Postmodernity*, which both debated postmodernism, something that seemed so urgent to many in the 1980s.

Davis went in a very different direction with a unique style, highlighting politics, labor and the economy — the stuff of class struggle that has often been marginal to academic leftists since the 1980s. *Prisoners of the American Dream* is in the tradition of writing that despairs over the American working class' failure to unify around a socialist orientation. The American Dream that holds them prisoner combines the hope that capitalism can deliver prosperity to all working people with white racial identity, which regularly divides the working class and undermines struggles.

Yet Davis did not tell a simplistic "the U.S. working class has been duped into accepting racialized capitalism" story. Instead, he emphasized the recurring bouts of class struggle. The work was deeply shaped by the social-history-from-below wave of the 1970s, but without the romanticization.

Prisoners of the American Dream also incorporated a great deal of the "regimes of accumulation" approach to understanding capitalist history that was evolving in the 1980s: that capitalism can be divided into phases, characterized by different forms of corporate organization, work and government interaction with the economy. Davis, however, had a more global perspective on capitalism than most authors with this approach.

The book has quite a bit of history of the ups and downs of elections, campaigns and efforts to transform the Democratic Party, epitomized by the chapter title "The Barren Marriage of American Labor and the Democratic Party." Although Davis came out of a Trotskyist tradition (he was associated with Solidarity, a Detroit-based organization descended from International Socialists), he was a nuanced observer of American politics. The book includes a forceful defense of Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination (just as in 2016, Davis enthusiastically embraced Bernie Sanders' bid).

Davis explores all these topics — social history, economic transformations and electoral politics — in remarkable, well-informed detail. Randomly selected pages brim with insights: "In the United States… The new middle class of professionals, salaried managers, and credentialed technicians comprised 23.8 per cent of the labor force in 1977 — a higher proportion than in any other OECD country except Sweden." That sentence expresses one of the book's major themes — that, along with the persistence of racism, the weight of the upper middle class, heavily entangled with the state, poses a major obstacle to a left advance. It's a point that's still relevant almost 40 years later, is still relevant, given the successful marginalization of Sanders by upper-middle-class centrists in the Democratic party establishment and their failure to stop two senators from blocking more ambitious programs.

Obituaries and remembrances have described Davis as an optimist, but there isn't much evidence for that here. His depiction of what was then the recent past of the 1970s is particularly vivid: Racism resurgent, a demobilized and disorganized left, and capitalists facing new international competition and seeing an opportunity to break social contracts. He presented a grim future of an increasingly apartheid U.S., and it would be interesting to evaluate what has and has not come to pass.

If the U.S. left is to renew itself, he suggested, it will be closely aligned with the Latin American left, an outlook that seemed more palpable in the 1980s, when the movement in solidarity with leftists in Central America was thriving (*Prisoners of the American Dream* was dedicated to the rebels against El Salvador's military dictatorship).

In any case, contemporary left writers should treasure this book. Although labor and politics both get attention these days, there are few efforts to connect them to the evolution of capitalism, both domestically and globally. Mike Davis' first book should provide ample inspiration to renew this effort. The last thing we should do now is overlook it.

ESTEBAN JIMENEZ

MEET THE ORIGINAL FASCISTS

Blood and Power: The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism
By John Foot
Bloomsbury Publishing, September 2022

By Steven Wishnia

I know far less about the history of Italian fascism than I do about Nazism or Latin American military dictatorships. My knowledge is a jumble of the dates of 1922-1943; its "blackshirts" goon squads; their 1922 march on Rome to seize power; the Federico Fellini film where they forced castor oil down his fictional father's throat and left him covered in bruises and diarrhea; and dictator Benito Mussolini's ignominious end, his corpse hung from a meathook like a pig carcass.

British historian John Foot's *Blood and Power: The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism* is an antidote to that. It's a highly readable, horrifying and extremely timely overview. Fascism has closer parallels with Donald Trump's movement than Nazism does: Imagine if the January 2021 invaders of the Capitol had been efficiently organized on a national scale, with the toleration or active support of the military and police.

In the early 1920s, the blackshirts — "squadristi" (squadmen) in Italian — systematically wiped out the Italian left and Italian democracy. They ransacked and burned labor-union headquarters; kidnapped, tortured and murdered socialist leaders (yes, a favorite trick was forcing them to drink diarrhea-inducing quantities of castor oil and parading them through the streets); and invaded cities to depose leftist or antifascist local governments.

Italy had a strong, militant left in the "two red years" of 1919-20, with unions occupying factories and establishing workers' cooperatives, and socialist governments in cities such as Milan, Bologna, Ravenna and Ancona. But when revolutionary socialist Ennio Gnudi was elected mayor of Bologna in November 1920, squadristi ousted him within an hour, storming the city hall and killing 10 people.

In June 1921, the first fascists elected to Parliament assaulted Communist deputy Francisco Misiano and threw him out of the building. Socialist deputy Giuseppe Di Vagno, from the southern region of Puglia, was murdered that September. In July 1922, squadristi attacked Ravenna, burning a workers' cooperative headquarters and killing at least nine people. "We need to terrify our adversaries," leader Italo Balbo wrote.

That culminated in the October 1922 "March on Rome," when thousands of fascists converged on the city, seizing power when King Victor Emmanuel III refused to approve the prime minister's demand for martial law and replaced him with Mussolini.

"Fascism was built on a mound of dead bodies, cracked heads, traumatized victims of violence, burnt books, and smashed-up cooperatives and union headquarters," Foot writes. "Fascist violence brought something fundamentally new to the political scene: a militia party, whose use of murder, beatings, intimidation, and destruction swept aside all opposition."

For all its day-by-day detail about what happened, *Blood and Power* says little about why people became fascists. Mussolini had been a prominent socialist, editor of the Milan newspaper Avanti! — which his squadristi would later ransack and burn — and was imprisoned for opposing the 1911-12 war to colonize Libya before he became a World War I hawk. It does not explain how the former Communist Nicola Bombacci, who was executed alongside Mussolini, had gone from being a comrade of Vladimir Lenin to an adviser in Italy's Nazi puppet government, except to quote a 1945 speech where he said he was still on the side of "the rights of the workers."

Any such explanation would likely be more psychological than political. Fascism is not an ideology with a set of principles, like socialism, anarchism, democratic liberalism, traditional conservatism or libertarianism. It's more visceral than rational, historian Robert O. Paxton wrote in his essential analysis *The Anatomy of Fascism*. It's an authoritarian, apocalyptic mélange of purist nationalism and personality-cult worship that venerates violence and domination.

STRONGMAN: *Benito Mussolini speaks to an adoring crowd in Rome. He ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943.*

By 1924, Italy's parliamentary elections had been rigged by laws and violence. Socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti was abducted and murdered after he gave a speech calling them illegitimate. The regime abolished elections in 1926.

Blood and Power's narrative slows down after that, as resistance had been wiped out except for several attempts to assassinate Mussolini and what Foot calls "glorious, symbolic, individual" acts "which had no political impact whatsoever."

Italian fascism was not as racially obsessed as Nazism, but its racism inevitably emerged. It accompanied the bloody conquests of Libya (completed in 1934) and Ethiopia in 1935, in the belief that a great nation must have an empire. "Finally, Italy has its empire… a fascist empire," Mussolini said in a May 1936 speech.

He called Ethiopia "a barbarian country." In 1937, his regime slaughtered more than 19,000 people in Addis Ababa after an assassination attempt on the military viceroy there. In 1938, it enacted laws to discriminate against Jews, declaring "A pure Italian 'race' exists… the Jews are not part of the Italian race."

Mussolini's regime crumbled quickly in 1943, as his alliance with Nazi Germany led to privation and defeat. There were massive strikes by factory workers in Turin in the spring, the first since 1922, and the Allies invaded Sicily and bombed Rome that July. Mussolini was ousted and arrested by his own government on July 25.

It was far from over, though: The Nazis took over and made him head of the puppet government they set up. In April 1945, with the Allies nearing victory, he tried to escape to Switzerland, but was captured and shot by Communist partisans, and his desecrated corpse was strung up from the ruins of a Milan gas station.

The specter hasn't gone away. New Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party is directly descended from the fascist movement revived after World War II. Historian Paxton, originally reluctant to call Trump's movement fascist, wrote in January 2021 that his open encouragement of violence to overturn an election made the label "not just acceptable but necessary."

"Italian fascism showed how democracy, and its institutions, can quickly crumble in the face of violence, disaffection, and rage," Foot concludes. "Some of this was seen in the USA after 2016, and not just in the armed attack on the Capitol in January 2021. When the 'forces of law and order' are also on board, things can quickly disintegrate."

LIFE AFTER DEATH

By Karen Malpede

The world is awash in grief. Covid, of course, climate change, wars, nuclear threat, famine, what else... And perhaps the start of our collective sorrow is not the pandemic, but should be dated from September 11, 2001, the dawn of the 21st century. If the answers to "why do they hate us so much?" had been entirely different, there might have been a collective turning toward nonviolence, toward listening, the crucial nonviolent activity.

Taking the knee in crowds, outside in parks and malls, as we did for George Floyd, to mourn both his murder and our violent history, silent for almost nine minutes, is as close as we've come to collective mourning for those killed and for the thousands who died alone in hospitals, prisons, on the street, victims of a plague that forbade human touch.

Given all the people who disappeared in clouds of sludgy ash on 9/11, or in Iraq, or behind plastic curtains, tubes down their throats, I must be lucky. George Bartinieff, my partner of 35 years, in life and creative work, died in my arms in our bed at 2:08 am on July 30. I felt his last heartbeat. He is nevertheless gone and my grief is a vast unknown I am lost in.

I had been reading him Romantic poetry much of that last night; his favorite poem of all time, "Ode to the West Wind." The night before I had spoken with him, though he could no longer speak, most of the night through. We spoke of dying in this way: I repeated all the thoughts we had shared with each other as his illness worsened over several years. We both loved the natural world. "You will go back into life," I said, using as many metaphors as I could. I quoted George Bernard Shaw, "Of life only there is no end." In the early morning, he squeezed my hand, and managed to say, "that was good." Did he mean this last talk, our whole time as partners on this earth, his entire life? All, perhaps.

One Saturday before, we made a trip by ambulance to the Brooklyn Hospital emergency room, where doctors rehydrated George, allowing him to live his last week. There, he said, "I feel I am losing language and sense." I wept and wept in the frigid ER. Someone approached me from behind and put a heated sheet over my summer sweater. Suddenly warmed, I calmed.

In the final week of his life, George was visited by family and close friends. George's oncologist, who was also his primary care physician, made a house call, and then Fed Ex'ed me the supplies I would need to keep his mouth moist.

I sat on the bed near George and others stood or sat around. Collaborators in our theater or friends, all of whom adored George and were loved by him. Everyone spoke with great warmth, sharing memories of happy times. We laughed a lot. His eyes sparkled with that irrepressible joy he clung to even then. For the first few days, he could move his arms, as if holding the assembled company in a final embrace. His silence was a kind of holding court.

• • •

BEATRIZ SCHILLER

MASTER OF HIS CRAFT: *George Bartenieff as Uncle in* Extreme Whether. *Written and directed by Karen Malpede.*

George was the co-founder of Theater for the New City. He was a force that discerned and attracted the most innovative creators of the avant-garde: early gay theaters Angels of Light, and Bette Bourne's Bloolips, Mabou Mines, Bread and Puppet, Irene Fornes, Spider Women, Anohni, everyone on the cutting edge, plus producing three eco-festivals, founding the Greenwich Village Halloween parade. He had no time to act, always raising funds so the building, whose future he secured, might survive.

We met at TNC in 1987. Judith Malina cast George in my play *Us*, a sensual-sexual drama of passion and abuse, in which two actors play six characters, themselves and their parents as lovers. There was some cross-dressing required, so in one scene in huge platform heels and a slinky dress, George played the narcissistic mother of one of his male characters. In another, he became a stallion striving to mate, and so it went. *Us* marked his return to what he did best, transformational acting in poetic plays. He'd trained in London on Shakespeare. He made his Broadway debut at age 14. He'd studied from age 11 at Maria and Irwin Piscator's epic theater school. He learned dramatic ritual earlier, at an experimental school in Bavaria, as a six-year-old hidden child in Nazi Germany, sent by aunts in whose care he had been left, to get him away from a Nazi collaborator in the family.

George fell in love with my play, *Us*, just as in 1963, he had fallen for a very different but equally extreme theatrical poem, *The Brig*, by Kenneth Brown, which Judith had also directed. We worked together for the next 35 years, creating, premiering and touring 12 new poetic plays on subjects from genetic engineering to the Holocaust, censorship of climate science, the war in Iraq, the U.S. torture program and post-apocalypse ecofantasy. George had an unusually resonant voice and a malleable, shape-changing body. As we worked on my plays in which he had major parts written for him, he became more and more mesmerizing onstage. He disappeared inside his characters, fully animated by his transformative powers: his honed empathic sense, his shape-shifting body and voice. He gave an enormous amount to the other actors on stage, by paying them deep attention, and the ensemble rose to embrace his uniquely holistic style.

We passed every pandemic evening reading from a great book. I read aloud as he could not see the words, but his listening was so acute we were able to discuss in detail stunning passages from Hardy, Camus, LeGuin, Baldwin, Gordimer, etc.

In his final stage and film performance with Kathleen Chalfant in *Blue Valiant*, he was Sam Brown, horse trader, a role completely alien but one whose crusty insight he loved. Because I left him on stage the entire time, so he would not have to climb up and down, he also became a demi-god, overseeing with intense focus the wellbeing of each other character, including the immigrant child and the horse. In these final years, struggling with multiple myeloma and the effects of treatment, he became evermore free and mysterious, as if through his acting he touched the eternal. His transformation into an owl in *Other Than We*, literally winged without proper rehearsal, is unforgettable. No one guessed the extent of his disabilities, what they felt was the vibrant life force within, an electric zap to their hearts.

Though he and I never mentioned the word "funeral," and hardly ever said the word "death," when he died I knew he had to be memorialized, without dogma. In keeping with our secular Judaism, there was an immediate, intimate cremation ceremony held outside, under a huge beach tree in Greenwood Cemetery. Those few asked to speak also read poetry. I read for him his favorite speech as Uncle from *Extreme Whether.* A month later, I traveled with friends to Vermont to the Bread and Puppet memorial grove where in an improvised ceremony, serenaded by their brass band, Peter Schumann, George's oldest friend, on trumpet, I nailed his hat to a tall pine tree, surrounded by flowers. We scattered his ashes and shared memories. I knew I had to be the first to reach into that box and feel for myself the grit of his bone mixed with ash, but I could never have done such a thing if not held in community.

On Oct. 1, over two 200 people attended or streamed his public memorial at LaMama. I edited a selection from his diary about his early life as a hidden child that was read aloud, interviews about the Lower East Side scene were screened; in both he was disarmingly charming. He acted in selections from some of his best work we have managed to preserve on film. This memorial gave George back to me in health. He was never ill when he was making art.

What do I know of grief? Nothing but a depth of sorrow and an utter aloneness I never experienced with George. What do I know of loss? Only that I was one of the lucky ones in these years of mass death who was able to hold and comfort my love as he lost language, movement and breath. This was a promise and a privilege. We are lucky when we can accompany this far our beloved. The three memorials, too, though I never promised those, feel the fulfillment of a public need to remember him with and for the community of artists and visionaries he did so much to nurture and sustain.

REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS

Dear Rev Billy,
I recently saw some early holiday-themed displays in a store. Ugh. Can't stand all the commercialism around us. What can I do to not let it all get to me?

— SANDRA

Well Sandra. We reached 8 billion people on this Earth today, and if all of us were disgusted at once it wouldn't matter. The sixth mass extinction is underway and accelerating.

There are variations on an old joke that people say off the cuff. "Shop till you drop." "Shop yourself to death." "He who dies with the most toys wins." But the United States, birthplace of the consumerism that became the world's raging infection, is now catching up to its own cliché. We have the choice to stop shopping and work with the Earth's changes, or we can shop till we drop, or burn, or drown, or starve.

Strange how "shop to death" still sounds a lot like a joke, even after becoming the truth. When I started shouting it in Times Square 20 years ago it WAS a joke. A satirical televangelist with big hair with Mickey Mouse the antichrist. I knew that there was justice hidden in the joke, but with that justice part — I was less sure of myself.

I wasn't defending the Earth in those early days, I was defending young women who worked in sweatshops in Mexico and Tanzania and the Philippines. I was more confident when Charley Kernighan and Barbara Briggs and the National Labor Committee folks walked up and put their card on my pulpit.

The Disney Store, which was at 42nd St. and Broadway back then, was 100% sweatshop products. Mickey Mouse was the great betrayer; he was (and is) the antichrist. And people began improvising songs on that sidewalk, songs about losing your eye-sight trying to see the needles, songs about company thugs kicking girls who fall asleep after 18 hours on the job...And the thing was, I knew that there was a sweatshop on the same block where I was preaching on 41st over there. Charley and Barbara would lead parades around the block and we would wave to the workers. Kids. really.

That's what's happening to us. We are joking about the bad weather and the storm is on the same street where we stand, where we stand with 8 billion people. Oh, amazing how we keep the 150 mph winds and the flooding seas at a safe distance. We have the disasters encased in our Santa, pixelated on screens...That two-mile wide tornado? We put a Coca Cola in the middle of the spinning green darkness and suddenly we're pulling styrofoam out of packaging under the dying pine tree.

Sandra. You ask, "What can I do to not let it all get to me?" Let it get to you. Then use your disgust to escape. Maybe your disgust is your doorway out. Walk through it and get directions to the winter solstice. Make it personally crucial that you reach the Earth itself. Find the crisis.

Getting out of commercial Christmas leaves many of us lost — it's the USA ritual. But however we return to the Earth, be patient because we haven't done this in a while. Stick with it and work through it. Life is this year's gift! Stop Shopping!

Earthalujah!
REV BILLY

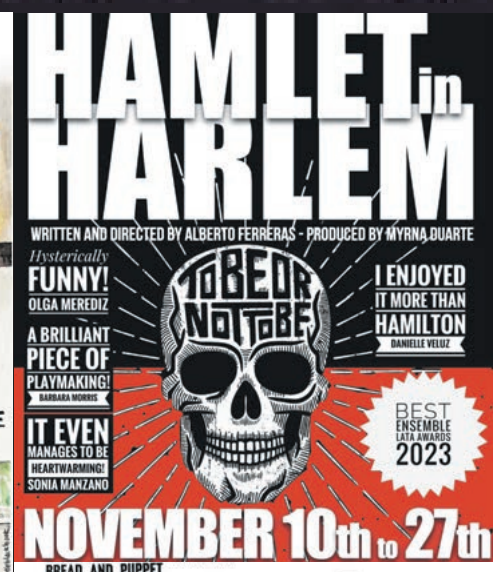
REVEREND BILLY TALEN IS THE PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE REVEREND? EMAIL REVBILLY@REVBILLY.COM AND UNBURDEN YOUR SOUL.

THEATER FOR THE NEW CITY

THEATER FOR THE NEW CITY
Crystal Field, Executive Director Presents
THE VERY LAST DANCE OF HOMELESS JOE
A NEW PLAY BY RICH COURAGE
December 1,2,3 8,9,10, 15,16,17 at 8PM
December 4, 11, 18 at 3 PM

LIV'N DEAD

Written & Directed by
TERRY LEE KING
Thursday - Sunday
December 1-18
Thu-Sat 8pm, Sun 3pm
All Seats $18


HAMLET in HARLEM
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY ALBERTO FERRERAS - PRODUCED BY MYRNA DUARTE
Hysterically FUNNY! OLGA MEREDIZ
A BRILLIANT PIECE OF PLAYMAKING! BARBARA MORRIS
IT EVEN MANAGES TO BE HEARTWARMING! SONIA MANZANO
TO BE OR NOT TO BE
I ENJOYED IT MORE THAN HAMILTON DANIELLE VELUZ
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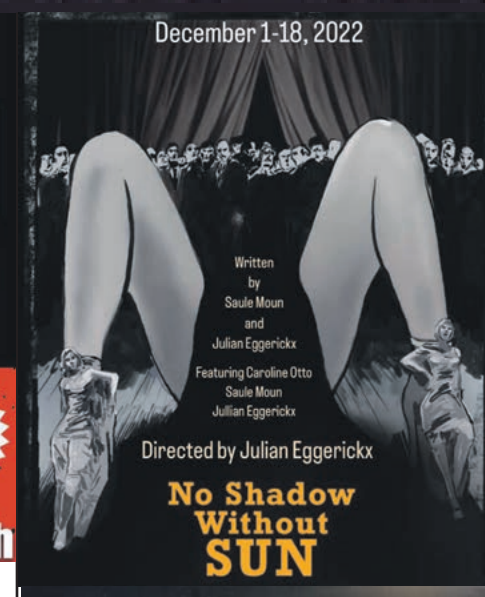
NOVEMBER 10th to 27th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Written by Saule Moun and Julian Eggerickx
Featuring Caroline Otto Saule Moun Julian Eggerickx
Directed by Julian Eggerickx
No Shadow Without SUN

EXTRA BUTTER • Nov 10-27
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THE WHITE BLACKS
THE GUMBO RETURNS NOV 10-27, 2022
GUESS WHO AIN'T COMING TO DINNER?
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MELANIE MARIA GOODREAUX
FEATURING
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